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What happened during the climate change negotiations in Copenhagen 2009?

Ibon Galarraga, Mikel González-Eguino and Anil Markandya¹

This policy briefing summarizes the results of the last United Nations Climate Change summit (COP 15) held in Copenhagen (Denmark) between 7-18 December. The postures taken by the main countries during the summit, the main outcome, and some areas that created certain frustration on the international stage are analysed.

Keywords: Climate change, COP 15, UNFCCC

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1. Introduction

Expectations were high in the run up to the last United Nations Climate Change summit (COP 15) held in Copenhagen (Denmark) between 7-18 December. There were four main questions to be answered at the summit. which Yvo de Boer, Secretary of UNFCCC, summarised at the press conference:

- What was the industrial countries' commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions?
- To what point were developing countries prepared to go to limit an increase of their emissions?
- What economic resources were needed to help developing countries with the commitment to reduce emissions and with the measures to adapt to climate change?
- How would the necessary economic resources be managed?

This policy briefing summarizes the postures taken by key countries during the summit and the outcome. It also analyses if the main question posed by Yvo de Boer was answered and if expectations were met.

2. Summary by countries

The most important positions of the 194 countries at the United Nations were:

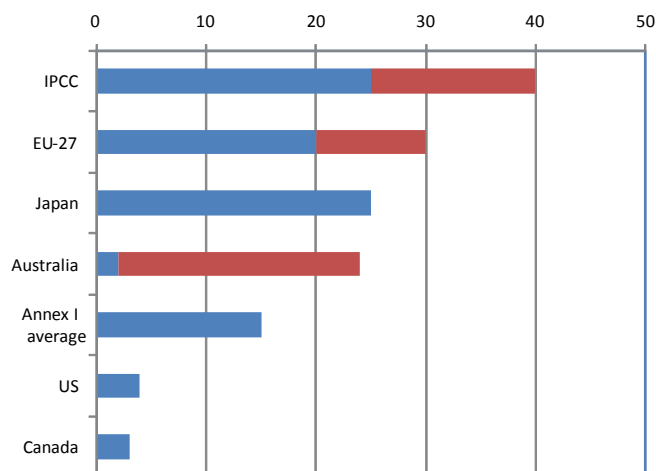
- The **United States of America** went to the summit with the commitment (based on the Waxman-Markey Act) to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for 2020 by 17% with respect to 2005² levels (which is equivalent to 4% with respect to 1990 levels), 30% by 2025, 42% by 2030 and 83% by 2050. The proposal is significantly lower than that of the European Union or Japan, and even less ambitious than the Kyoto Protocol itself overall (see Figure 1). Even so, this proposal still has to be approved by the Senate.
- **China** went to the COP 15 with the commitment to reduce emissions by 40-45%.³ It was suggested that this measure, even though it reflects progress, would not be a significant step forward as the country will surely curb emission by 40% without any additional measures. However, this measure would be an absolute reduction of emissions greater than that proposed by the United States with the Waxman-Markey Act. Even though coal generates 75% of China's electricity, the renewable energy subsidies approved by China has led to a true boom in these technologies. China's target is to generate 20 GW in wind power and 1.8 GW in solar power by 2020, however, the new approved policies are likely to ensure that 150 GW and 20 GW are respectively achieved.

² It is fundamental to use the same base year in order to be able to compare the comparison effort. 1990 is usually used as the base.

³ It is important not to confuse reducing emissions with reducing the intensity of the emissions (emissions by GDP unit). Reducing the intensity does not imply reducing emissions, but rather a saving with regard to the emissions that otherwise would occur in a Business As Usual scenario.

- **India's** proposals were less ambitious than those from China, and had a stronger position against the idea that developing countries could also contribute with some effort. It must be noted that India's emissions per capita are around 1.7 tonnes, among the lowest outside Africa, whereas China's are 5.5 tonnes.
- **Europe** overall is the only group of countries (EU-15) where GGE were 6.2% lower at the end of 2008 than the 1990 figures. It is also the only region which seems most likely to meet the targets set in Kyoto to reduce its emissions by 8% with respect to 1990. The EU has approved binding energy and climate change targets for 2020 that seek to reduce emissions by 20% with respect to 1990⁴. EU went to the COP 15 with the unilateral commitment to reduce emissions by 20%, and ready to increase it to 30% if the other countries were also willing to cooperate. The EU has also have an emission permits market operating since 2005 which affects 50-55% of the total GGE in the region.
- **Brazil** could be considered as the representative of developing or emerging countries at the summit as well as of those countries whose emissions come substantially from their forests (African countries and Indonesia, for example). These countries therefore went to the COP with the intention to establish a mechanism (similar to the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Deforestation, REDD) to help to offset them, protect their forests as CO2 deposits and to conserve biodiversity. Brazil, in the same way as China and India, are global players and as such have begun to participate actively in the areas of concern to the international community, such as climate change. The main targets taken to the COP were to reduce the deforestation rate in the Amazon by 70% over a ten-year period (2007 to 2017) and to develop a reforestation plan to increase the forested area in Brazil.

Figure 1: % emissions reduction with respect to 1990 announced/required for 2020 by the main developed countries



⁴ Reaching a 20% improvement in energy efficiency along with a 20% penetration of renewable energy in the European mix are key components of the GGE reduction strategy.

3. Outcome of the summit

There was an agreement at the COP 15 and no-one is indifferent to it.⁵ Ban Ki-moon (Secretary General of the United Nations) himself recognised the importance of having reached an agreement, which even though it is not everything everyone expected, does represent an essential beginning (UNFCCC Press Release, 19 December 2009). Secretary Boer likewise recognised that even though the world left Copenhagen with an agreement, the commitment to reduce emissions would have to increase considerably if we want to achieve the target of temperature not increasing by more than 2 °C (UNFCCC Press Note, 19 December 2009).

Some countries, such as Bolivia, Venezuela or Cuba, criticised the agreement due to the way it was adopted. This is, agreed by 4 countries behind closed doors and submitted to the plenary session for its immediate approval without the option of being discussed. NGOs and other social groups criticised the agreement as they consider it to be rather wanting and weak as it is not binding.

The agreement that was finally adopted at the summit is summarised in the following ten points:

- The signing parties accept that climate change is one of the major challenges of our time and acknowledge a clear political commitment to fight it from the principle of common yet differentiated responsibilities.
- The maximum 2°C limit put forward by the scientists is established as the target for the international mitigation measures. However, the importance of fighting to eradicate poverty and sustainable development is also taken into account.
- The need for pressing international cooperation is recognised in the field of climate change adaptation policies with the aim of increasing resilience and reducing vulnerability, mainly those of developing countries, small island states, and Africa.
- The developed (Annex I) countries will individually or collectively undertake measures to reduce emissions by 2020, whose specific targets shall be reported before 31 January 2010. Those members that are parties to the Kyoto Protocol shall thus confirm their commitments to it. They shall follow the reporting and accounting recommendations of the Conference of the Parties.
- The developing (non-Annex I) countries shall implement the mitigation measures to be sent to them before 31 January 2010.
- The crucial role of reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation is recognised, by stressing the importance of creating mechanisms that encourage the protection of the forests, including the mechanism known as REDD-plus.
- The need to apply different mechanisms (including the markets) to encourage cost-effective mitigation measures is recognised. Developing countries shall be supported to keep emission levels low.

⁵ Even though the 4-page final product was significantly lighter than the original document discussed which was 100 pages long.

- The need to set up funding mechanisms for developing countries to accelerate mitigation (including REDD), adaptation, development and technology transfer policies is accepted. Therefore, the setting up of a 30 billion US dollar fund for the 2010-2012 period is accepted. The adaptation policies in the most vulnerable developing countries shall be prioritised. The mobilisation of an annual 100 billion dollar fund for 2020 to cover the needs of developing countries is likewise accepted. This funding may be public, private, multilateral, bilateral and shall even include alternative funding options. The Copenhagen Green Climate Fund has therefore been set up.
- The fund shall be established as a financial mechanism of the Agreement to support the projects, programmes, policies and other measures in developing countries for mitigation questions, adaption (including REDD-plus), skills development, and development and technological transfers.
- The review of this agreement for 2015 is proposed, including the possibility to establish targets that are coherent with temperature increases up to 1.5 °C.

4. Assessment of the outcome of the summit

Even though it is true that much more was expected from a summit that was the culmination of a process of the so-called Bali Road Map, some positive aspects of the summit, some frustrating aspects and other aspects that are more difficult to assess have to be stressed in order to provide an objective analysis:

Positive aspects:

- **2°C target.** Political consensus was obtained regarding the global target of limiting CO₂ emissions in order not to exceed the average temperature increase of 2 °C. This point had until then only been backed by the scientific community, but without a clear, firm and global political commitment. Now it is included in the Copenhagen agreement.
- **Creation of an adaptation fund.** The “Copenhagen Green Climate Fund” was set up to cover the funding requirements to deal with the adaptation measures and other mitigation policies of developing countries. This fund which has an initial budget of 30 billion US dollars for the coming two years is one of the main claims of southern countries. However, the specific operation of the fund and other important aspects of its management still have to be established.
- **Turning point in international climate change negotiations.** From a historical perspective, since the Kyoto Protocol was approved, the political importance given to the fight against climate change has increased. From the perspective of climate change policy, the Copenhagen Summit was a point of no return, of not looking backwards towards defending policies that did not really encourage the fight against climate change.
- **Japan and Europe leadership consolidation.** Special mention should also be made of the positions of the EU and Japan which went to the COP 15 with truly ambitious targets and they have remained coherent in their speeches.
- **US and China incorporation.** An agreement that both the USA and China have accepted, even though it is not very ambitious, is a U-turn on their national policies and therefore an important

fact. With regard to the US position, some international analysts have suggested that health care reform in the USA has proven to be an immediate priority on the political agenda of President Barack Obama in his negotiations with the Senate. This in turn has relegated the eagerly awaited and ambitious targets in the fight against climate change postponing their future developments to 2010. The position of China is noted for its radical defence of the historical responsibility of developed countries in terms of emissions and its pragmatism to reach agreements that do not compromise its current rate of economic growth.

Frustrating aspects:

- ***Slow rate of progress in the negotiation.*** Very slow political progress is being made compared to the rate at which emissions are speeding up (and the construction of infrastructures that will generate emissions in the future). It is important to recall that emissions increased by 70% between 1970 and 2004. During a more recent period, the results have also been unsatisfactory, given that emissions have increased by 10% in the period 1990-2005 according to the IPCC reports.
- ***Lack of precision.*** The agreement does not set specific mitigation targets for countries. It will be hard for the agreed target of 2°C to be met with the reductions proposed so far by the countries, as that would require global emissions being reduced by 50% by 2050 and by approximately 80% in developed countries. It is therefore fundamental that these figures be specified in 2010 in such a way that the target is between 25-40% by 2020 in developed countries.

Other aspects to be considered:

- ***Consensus and scope of global agreements.*** A delicate aspect at the majority of the COPs, and which will be recurrent in the future, is the difficulty to reach agreements that are substantial and binding and which have also been adopted by consensus in the UNFCCC plenary session where 194 countries are represented. That happened at the COP15, where the agreement approved by the majority of countries (except Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba) was prepared behind closed doors by the United States, China, India and South Africa. On the one hand, those 4 countries account for over 50% of the emissions and the world's population and are benchmarks of different cultures and continents. If we add the EU-27 and Japan, who went with a clear emissions offer, to those countries, we would obtain a very high representation (See Table 1). On the other hand, it is also necessary to preserve the United Nations and international legality mechanisms, however expensive and inefficient they may be at times, in a world that needs strong global political authorities (in keeping with existing global problems) and which understand the dangers of unilateral or multilateral approaches in parallel forums.
- ***Transparency.*** One of the keys and hurdles of the negotiation in Copenhagen was measuring and monitoring emissions using international standards. In this respect, the text of the Copenhagen Agreement is not really clear about what China's attitude will be in the future, as even though it accepts the transparency principle, that is conditioned to the limits of defending its "national sovereignty". We must not forget that despite China's huge economic and energy advances, the

People's Republic still continues to be a country without democratic freedoms and quite opaque in some respects, which will hinder a future agreement.

Table 1: Figures for the main countries: population, economics, emissions and forests (2002)

	Population (Millions)	Income per capita, PPP (US\$)	Global emissions (%)	Emissions per capita (tCO ₂)	Global forest area (%)
U.S	300	34.557	20,6	23	7,7
China	1.313	4.379	14,7	3,8	5,0
EU-25	450	22.917	14	10,5	5,3
Russia	144	7.993	5,7	13,3	20,5
India	1.134	2.572	5,6	1,7	1,7
Japan	128	25.788	3,9	10,3	0,6
Brazil	187	7.480	2,5	4,6	12,1
Indonesia	226	3.057	1,5	2,2	2,2
South Africa	55	9.750	1,2	7,6	0,2

Source: WRI, World Resources Institute

5. Conclusions

Even though this document has sought to send out some optimism about the outcome of the summit, it is true that we are facing a period of great uncertainty about how mankind is going to implement the fight against climate change. And this is particularly true about the utility of the mitigation targets as an appropriate policy instrument for this task. Experts and analysts cannot agree on the foreseeable impact of this agreement. Some fragments of the text approved at the COP 15 area are subject to interpretation and should become clearer over the coming months. The progress made during 2010 will determine the validity of the UN Framework Convention as an instrument to slow down global warming and for us to adapt to its consequences.

Summarizing, the questions asked in the introduction can be said to have been answered in a vague manner, and in any event, without a firm and binding commitment. That means there is general uncertainty about climatic policies in the post-Kyoto horizon. Even though progress has been made regarding policy principles and, for the first time, countries such as the United States and China were involved in the negotiations. Different countries and interest groups have therefore indicated that they are truly disappointed with the result. Some countries have not only questioned the depth of the document but also the procedure used to approve it. This rather "unusual" procedure at a United Nations summit can only be explained by the need to achieve a minimum agreement with the necessary urgency. The main contents and technical questions have been put off until the forthcoming summit in Mexico (COP 16).

Further reading

UNFCCC drafts (<http://unfccc.int/>).

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