

Not perfect, but something for everyone: Cancún climate talks end with optimism renewed

Title

The climate change negotiations (COP-16) have concluded with the Cancún Agreement. After two weeks of intense discussion countries have reached a compromise, and set the world's efforts back on track for COP-17 next year in Durban, where there is renewed optimism that a globally binding agreement on long term actions to address climate change could be made. The last few hours in Cancún displayed a spirit of constructive compromise, with nearly all parties remarking that although the Cancún Agreement is not perfect, it contains elements they like. It seems that the text has something for all. So what makes this package emerging from Cancún balanced? In BirdLife's view there were three main advances. Firstly, a deal to protect tropical forests was kicked off. The scope and goal of a new mechanism (REDD+), which will deliver financial incentives to developing countries to conserve and restore their forests, was agreed. "This is a significant step forward, to both reduce emissions and conserve tropical forests", remarked John Lanchbery, Principle Climate Change Advisor at the RSPB, and co-chair of the Climate Action Network REDD Group. "Safeguards are included in the agreement to ensure that the biodiversity benefits of forests are fully recognised, and the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities are protected." However, how these safeguards will be applied and respected, as well as many financial and methodological issues surrounding REDD, will need to be worked out in the coming months. Secondly, advances were made to assist adaptation to climate change. The agreement affirms that adaptation must be addressed with the same priority as mitigation. A Cancún Adaptation Framework was established to enhance action in adaptation, including through international cooperation, which recognises the needs and contributions of nature. An Adaptation Committee with functions was also agreed. "Overall this a good outcome for adaptation. It has finally received the attention it deserves within the climate change talks, with advances on several important components, although much detail needs to be worked out, and links with finance still need to be strengthened", said Robert Munroe, Climate Change Officer at BirdLife International. Thirdly, an important step was taken to start to address the finance required, with the establishment of the Green Climate Fund, which will support developing country actions on climate change mitigation and adaptation. But fundamentally, finance is still needed, and those funds pledged a year ago in Copenhagen must be realised. Disappointingly little progress was made on setting legally binding emission reduction targets to curb global warming, and keep temperature rises to below 2 degrees. Procedural efforts were made to inscribe the pledges made in Copenhagen, although adequate, and it remains urgent that these are addressed next year. Countries must close the gigatonne gap between the emission reduction pledges on the table, and what the science demands. Overall the talks were undoubtedly aided by the strong leadership of Mexico, with parties applauding the transparent and inclusive way in which the negotiations were conducted, dispelling the discontent of Copenhagen last year. "The UN process is back on the road after the disappointment of Copenhagen", said Melanie Heath, Senior Climate Change Advisor at BirdLife. "We have come away with renewed faith in multilateralism" but the challenge remains on how to translate these uplifting aspirations into a fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement. "Negotiations in the new year will not be easy. Countries must continue to work together with urgency to build on the agreement made in Cancún, to narrow their differences and ensure that the spirit of ambition and compromise prevail."