

Some progress but distinct lack of ambition in Warsaw climate talks

Title

Greenhouse gas levels are rising; climatic impacts intensifying. Typhoon Haiyan, which devastated the Philippines just over a fortnight ago, is a bitter taste of what the future has in store for us if we continue on a business-as-usual path. The climate talks in the National Stadium in Warsaw (the 19th Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change – COP 19) during the last two weeks presented governments with a prime opportunity to change path, but they missed it. Once again, the climate talks were undermined by economic interests and short-sightedness.

While some progress was made, the actions agreed upon are not commensurate with the urgency of climate change. Rather than ramping up their mitigation ambitions, several developed countries back-tracked on their commitments and shirked their moral obligations. The expectation was that countries would agree to a clear pathway with interim targets and associated finance in order to limit their emissions now, and allow them to be in a position to adopt a new fair, ambitious and legally binding agreement at COP 21 in Paris in 2015, that would come into operation in 2020.

Governments agreed that this was needed two years ago in Durban. But this meeting saw a downward slide by some on the emission reduction targets they had stated previously, and a weakening of language to replace ‘commitment’ with ‘contribution’. The deadline for these ‘contributions’ to be brought to the table is late and apparently flexible, leaving very little time for consideration of the adequacy of these targets before Paris 2015.

“For a country to make a firm long-term commitment to reduce emissions is not easy; it goes to the root of economic and energy planning”, said Melanie Heath BirdLife’s Head of Policy. “However, it is possible to reduce emissions and continue to develop and grow sustainably. We urge countries to take this brave and balanced approach. Parties must make equitable, scientifically-grounded commitments to reduce their emissions, and should do this well in advance of Paris to stand any chance of an agreement being reached there.”

In terms of finance, the Adaptation Fund Board achieved its USD 100 million fundraising goal – a drop in the ocean, but encouraging progress nonetheless. “A number of approved project

proposals have been unable to be implemented due to a lack of funds, so it was a great relief to see the Board hit its fundraising target”, said Edward Perry, Climate Change Policy Officer at BirdLife International. “But this is just a start. Climate change is already impacting on people and nature, and it’s set to get worse. We urge governments to scale up adaptation finance.”

Less encouraging was the lack of agreement on a deadline for the first replenishment of the Green Climate Fund, and the lack of milestones, pathways and sources for achieving the commitment to mobilise USD 100 billion a year by 2020, which countries pledged in Copenhagen in 2009.

One victory in the Stadium last week was the adoption of The Warsaw Framework for REDD+. After seven long years, a breakthrough was finally made in the negotiations on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+), with countries adopting a package of seven decisions that finalise the governance framework for REDD+. These included decisions on how to measure, report and verify emissions reductions, set baselines against which to measure actions, and finance results-based actions. Importantly, the framework requires countries to demonstrate how social and environmental safeguards are being addressed and respected before receiving results-based finance. It also recognises the importance of incentivising non-carbon benefits, such as biodiversity.

“This agreed package marks a significant advancement in REDD+, and sends an important signal that REDD+ action will make a meaningful contribution to emission reductions, as well as forest conservation and restoration”, said Melanie Heath. “Linking safeguards to finance is essential. Only then can we ensure that forest governance, biodiversity protection (to ensure ecosystem resilience and permanence of emission reductions), and the full and effective participation of indigenous people and local communities, are safeguarded when undertaking REDD+ actions.” But there is still more to do next year to ensure that reporting of safeguards within information systems works effectively.

In the final hours of negotiations, respecting the commitments they made in Doha last year, countries agreed to establish a new body – the Warsaw international mechanism on Loss and Damage associated with climate change impacts. This addresses how to deal with damage in developing countries from extreme events and slow onset events caused by climate change that could not be abated by adaptation or mitigation efforts. “This is a positive step towards helping vulnerable countries cope with the unavoidable impacts of climate change”, said Edward Perry. “Parties must recognise that adaptation has its limits, and support those that cannot adapt. It is also important that we don’t lose sight of the fact that substantive investment in mitigation and proactive adaptation action today will reduce costs tomorrow.”

As we move into 2014, the clock is ticking. We can’t afford another Copenhagen, the COP in 2009 on which all hopes were pinned to agree a legally binding framework that stood a chance of keeping global temperature increases within 2 degrees above industrial levels. Four years on, how much closer are we? Dialogue is continuing, there is some trust between Parties to the UNFCCC, and the decisions taken in Warsaw on REDD+, and to some extent loss and damage, do demonstrate that significant progress is possible.

However, we urge parties not to waste any time at all between now and 2015. There will be no ‘extra time’ – devastating climate change impacts are being felt now. Fully utilise the meetings next year – the world leaders’ Climate Summit and COP 20 in Lima, Peru – and take the much needed actions at home. We the people, and our precious environment on which we

all depend, are relying on you.