



The facts: Weak ambitions and loopholes

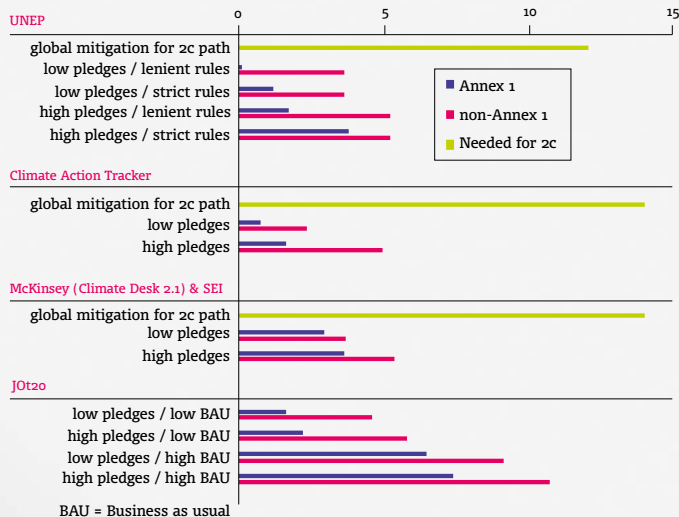
In the UNFCCC agreements made in Bali and Poznan, the Annex 1 countries were expected to agree, by March 2009, on a science-based aggregate target (at the time often assumed to lie in the range of 25-40 per cent emission reductions by 2020. In the remaining time leading up to the Copenhagen summit in December 2009, the countries would negotiate their respective legally binding commitments to ensure they jointly reached this agreed target – all so that the, legally binding figures could be enshrined in the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol in time for its starting date of 1 January 2013.

This never happened. The Annex 1 countries have refused to negotiate any real figures for emission reductions during the seven years of negotiations within the Kyoto Protocol. Instead, countries have ‘pledged’ their intentions, first through the Copenhagen Accord and later within the formal UNFCCC setting. However, there is no aggregate ambition to ensure these bottom-up pledges are in any way consistent with what is scientifically required.

Pledges

What do the pledges add up to, and how do the ambitions of Annex 1 and non-Annex 1 countries compare?

Figure 1: Pledged mitigation in 2020 – Annex 1 vs non-Annex 1 (GtCO₂eq)



Source: Kartha and Erickson, 2011

First, the pledges of Annex 1 countries only add up to between 12 and 18 per cent reductions by 2020 compared to 1990. The US pledges to reduce by only 4 per cent, while Canada is even intending to increase relative to its 1990 emission levels.

Second, the pledges of the rich countries amount to less mitigation than the pledges put forward by the developing countries. A meta-study by Stockholm Environment Institute reviewed four independent studies comparing Annex 1 and non-Annex 1 pledges, finding that across a wide range of methodologies and assumptions, all concluded the same: developing countries promise more!

Loopholes cancel out developed-country pledges

On top of the low pledges, Annex 1 countries also have a range of 'loopholes' to further weaken their commitments.

These accounting loopholes could more than negate the pledges of Annex I countries. Taken together, the loopholes will weaken the pledges by between 3 and 8 Gt CO₂ equivalents in 2020 (UNEP, 2010). If Annex 1 countries commit only to their lower ('unconditional') pledges, these loopholes would completely negate the pledged emission reductions. Even assuming the Annex 1 countries commit to their higher ('conditional') pledges, which are estimated at 3.8 Gt CO₂ e in 2020 (UNEP 2010), they could be negated and Annex I countries would even be able to increase their emissions (Figure 1). And if there were loopholes still left over, the Annex 1 countries could use them to undermine the environmental integrity of a third commitment period.

The size of these current loopholes is staggering. Strong action is required now to close the loopholes effectively and efficiently if we want to preserve the possibility of staying below a temperature rise of 2° or 1.5°C. None of the technical issues around the loopholes is insurmountable. If developed countries are serious about fulfilling their responsibility to lead the fight against climate change, they need to put ambitious targets on the table that are in line with the science and do away with loopholes. So far, however, hardly anything has been done in the negotiations to close these loopholes.

What are the key loopholes?

Loopholes are weak rules that undermine reduction targets. Usually these weak rules are the result of political bargaining.

The largest loopholes are:

- » The carry-over of 'hot air' due to the overallocation of carbon trading emissions credits during the first commitment period.
- » Creation of new 'hot air' post-2012 due to weak targets.
- » 'Creative' accounting rules for land use, land use change and forestry ('LULUCF') for A1 countries.
- » CDM credits from projects that are either overcredited or not additional (that is, they would have been carried out anyway and thus cause no reductions).
- » Double counting – attributing emission reductions to both developed and developing countries.
- » Emissions from aviation and shipping ('bunkers') currently not accounted for under the Kyoto Protocol.

References

Sivan Kartha and Peter Erickson (2011), *Comparison of Annex 1 and non-Annex 1 pledges under the Cancun Agreements*, Stockholm Environment Institute Working Paper WP-US-1107. <http://sei-international.org/publications?pid=1899>

UNEP (2010), *The Emissions Gap Report: Are the Copenhagen Accord Pledges Sufficient to Limit Global Warming to 2°C or 1.5°C? A preliminary assessment*, November, Nairobi: UNEP.