Fact sheet: Why is a global climate change deal so important?

Climate change is one of the most fundamental challenges ever to confront humanity. Its impacts are already showing and will intensify over time if left unchecked. There is overwhelming scientific evidence, as shown in the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that climate change will threaten economic growth and long-term prosperity, as well as the very survival of the most vulnerable populations. IPCC projections indicate that if emissions continue to rise at their current pace and are allowed to double from their pre-industrial level, the world will face an average temperature rise of around 3°C this century. Serious impacts are associated with this scenario, including sea-level rise, shifts in growing seasons, and an increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as storms, floods and droughts.

The United Nations climate change negotiations offer a historical opportunity to step up international action on climate change. A comprehensive, ambitious and effective deal is essential to the global transition into green economic growth, and, most urgently, to help the world, especially the most vulnerable, adapt to impacts that are now inevitable.

Why must the world act as one?

Dealing decisively with climate change is key to ensuring sustainable development, poverty eradication and for safeguarding economic growth. Science indicates that inaction will be more costly than acting now. Economic development needs to be moved onto a low-emissions and climate-resilient path.

Stringent emission reductions are required to keep global temperature increases and corresponding climate change impacts as low as possible. A move towards a low-emissions society clearly requires a reorientation of global economic growth patterns. This necessitates innovative changes in the short and medium-term in technology in all sectors of the economy.

According to the IEA, global energy demand will grow 55% by 2030. In the period up to 2030, the energy supply infrastructure worldwide will require a total investment of USD 26 trillion, with about half of that in developing countries. If the world does not manage to green these investments by directing them into climate-friendly technologies, emissions will go up by 50% by 2050, instead of down by 50%, as science requires.

A global climate change deal needs to put in place the framework that will enable the world to make the transition to climate-resilient, green global growth. To achieve this, governments need to sign up to a new level of cooperation, followed by immediate actions.

What is the vision for a climate-resilient and low-emission future?

A shared vision for a climate-resilient and low-emission future can be built upon a long-term global goal for emission reductions that provides both the aspiration and the yardstick for establishing concrete and measurable actions and goals in the medium term. This goal for emission reductions must be based on sound science, as well as economic and technological feasibility. Scientific information from the IPCC suggests that to avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions need to peak in the next 10 to 15 years, and be reduced in the order of 50-80% below 1990 levels by 2050.

The long-term global goal for emission reductions will provide guidance on the scale of finance and investment needed both for mitigation and adaptation. The level of ambition of the mitigation effort will determine the range of new and additional financing needed for mitigation action and to address the adaptation challenge.

How can a global climate change deal unleash protection for those who will suffer most from the adverse impacts of climate change?

Climate change is becoming a major threat to efforts to promote sustainable economic and social development and to reduce poverty. Impacts are already showing and are very likely to increase as climate change takes hold. Consequently, it is absolutely essential that adaptation be accorded the same level of priority and support as mitigation. Adaptation thus needs to be one of the cornerstones of strengthened global cooperation on climate change.

Impacts fall disproportionately on the poor, those who do not have the means to deal with them. Impacts highlighted by the IPCC include:

- By 2020, in some African countries, yields from rain-fed agriculture (the dominant method) could be reduced by up to 50%;
- Approximately 20-30% of plant and animal species are likely to be at increased risk of extinction if increases in global average temperature exceed 1.5-2.5°C;
- Widespread melting of glaciers and snow cover will reduce melt water from major mountain ranges (e.g. Hindu Kush, Himalaya, Andes), where more than one billion people currently live;
- More than 20 million people were displaced by sudden climate-related disasters in 2008 alone. An estimated 200 million people could be displaced as a result of climate impacts by 2050.

Countries recognize that a strong adaptation framework is required, which addresses the needs of developing countries for scaled up financial support, technology and capacity-building. Increased investment in adaptive capacity, such as strengthening the ability of countries to reduce disaster risk, will safeguard economic progress already made, on the way to achieving overall development goals.

What are the political essentials for an effective global climate change deal?

A successful deal needs to map out how further global cooperation can be catalyzed by agreement on a number of political essentials.

1. Ambitious emission reduction targets for developed countries

Developed countries have accepted to continue taking the lead in reducing GHG emissions. Doing so requires agreement on an ambitious mid-term target for the group of developed countries as a whole, with each one of them making an effort of comparable scale in line with their historical responsibility and current capabilities.

To date, most developed countries have announced their mid-term target for emission reductions for 2020. However, despite the fact that countries have recognized a 2° C limit, pledges for mid-term targets by industrialized countries fall short of the IPCC range (25% to 40% below 1990 levels by 2020.) Negotiations could raise the current level of ambition to get to a reduction level in line with the imperatives of science by focusing on international mechanisms and cooperation.

2. Nationally appropriate mitigation actions of developing countries

The biggest contribution to the global emission increase over the next decades is projected to come from developing countries, though their average per capita CO_2 emissions will remain substantially lower than those in developed country regions. Developing countries have indicated their willingness to undertake additional nationally appropriate mitigation actions, provided that they receive support for such actions.

A major concern of developing countries is that mitigation actions could distract resources away from their overriding priorities, which are poverty eradication and economic growth. The Copenhagen deal could build on domestic mitigation actions underway or planned in developing countries, and identify how they can be enhanced with international support.

3. Scaling up financial and technological support for both adaptation and mitigation

Adequate financial, technological and capacity-building support is the engine for advancing international cooperation on climate change as well as national action. An essential part of a comprehensive deal at Copenhagen is identifying how to generate new, additional and predictable financial resources and technology. Countries have recognized that resources needed for both adaptation and mitigation will total at least USD 100 billion per annum in 2020.

Start-up funding is essential: The financial challenge is unique and particularly stark when it comes to current finance. At the moment, adaptation costs are primarily borne by the affected countries, including poor vulnerable communities which have no responsibility for emissions. Likewise, costs for the planning of additional mitigation actions are borne by developing countries. Industrialised countries have pledged start-up funding in the order of USD 10 billion per annum 2010-2012. Such funds need to be rapidly available to developing countries.

4. An effective institutional framework with governance structures that address the needs of developing countries

A new global climate change deal needs to deliver on an efficient mix of financial instruments with effective means for disbursement and for measurement, reporting and verification. Much of the currently available funding has not reached developing countries in a way that is regarded as efficient or beneficial. It is critical that the funds that are agreed have governance principles that are founded on equity, respecting the interests and needs of developing countries, and that includes them as equal decision-making partners.

Furthermore, the agreed outcome needs an institutional arrangement that optimizes the allocation of funds and provides for a transparent system to monitor, report and verify actions and support. There is also a need to strengthen existing institutions, while at the same time explore proposals for the creation of new institutions. The United Nations stands ready to assist countries in implementing a Copenhagen agreed outcome in a practical way.