



Copenhagen and after

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Copenhagen can only take us so far but by no means should it fail, rather it must serve to inspire novel thinking and innovative action at the bilateral, regional and national levels

In a recent edition of [The Guardian](#), American scientist James Hansen was quoted as saying that he wants the talks at Copenhagen to fail. I don't agree. Such an outcome would send quite the wrong signal to the world about the most dangerous set of risks humanity has ever had to face. Yet I do understand the concerns that led him to make such a statement. In truth – and one cannot emphasise this too strongly - whatever is or is not agreed at Copenhagen almost all the hard work will remain to be done. The old motto of the Suffragettes, "Deeds, not words!" should be the guiding theme of climate change policy.

If we consider deeds rather than words, just as Hansen emphasises, things in the real world do not look good. Consider, to begin with, the developed countries, which are supposed to take the lead in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions in a radical fashion. Most have made only limited progress towards reaching their Kyoto targets for emissions reductions, modest though these are (if we discount for the effects of the recession, which reduced emissions by about 9% in 2008).

A small cluster of states, such as Sweden, Denmark and Germany, have made significant headway. Closer examination, however, shows that most of what they have achieved thus far is not simply the result of active climate change policy. Sweden and Denmark reacted vigorously to the oil crisis of the 1970s, and began introducing renewable technologies at that point. Germany has made some advances in developing wind-power; nevertheless, renewable sources account for only some 7% of its energy mix.

Even in the "successful" countries, therefore, an absolute step-change in achievements thus far will be demanded. More worryingly, there is a long tail of states where little or no progress has been made, or where emissions have actually increased. In Europe one can point to countries such as Italy, Spain, and Greece. Elsewhere they include Japan, Australia, Canada – and the United States. In Canada emissions in 2007 were fully 22% over those of 1990, the baseline year of Kyoto, and have risen by almost as much in the US.

There has been much talk about the weak negotiating position President Obama will have at Copenhagen, given his difficulty in getting a Climate Change Bill through Congress. Quite apart from any such legislation, however, in the deeds-not-words world the task of actually reducing American emissions is huge. The American way of life is based upon cheap energy coupled to cheap credit, conjoined to more or less endless suburban expansion. How can these trends be reversed, and in the relatively short-term?

I don't see any policies in place at the moment commensurate with the scale of the problem. Many suppose that wind, solar, thermal and other low-carbon technologies can progressively substitute for fossil fuels – especially when added to greater energy conservation. They can be part of the solution, to be sure, but we will make little progress in reducing emissions unless we are able simultaneously to deal with consumption. Life-style change, and on a widespread level - across the industrialised world - is an exigency. GDP is deeply flawed as a measure of welfare, but no country has yet found a way of replacing it in a way citizens are prepared to accept. The report to President Sarkozy, written by a group of prominent economists, including Nobel Prize winner George Stiglitz, which calls for a radical reappraisal of growth strategies in the industrial world, must not be allowed to gather dust on the shelf.

So far as the poorer countries of the world are concerned the task is equally formidable, perhaps even more so. Essentially, a new model of development must be pioneered. China, India, Brazil and other developing nations have the right to aspire to living standards comparable to those of the developed world. Yet beyond a certain point it will be impossible for them simply to tread the same path as the rich countries have followed - the destructive consequences in terms of climate change will be far too large.

A great deal of creative thinking is needed here, and most of it will have to be social and political. We have to look to the possibility that some traditional ways of life and social connections should not be sacrificed on the altar of modernity, but can help show an alternative way to prosperity. For instance, could developing countries go back to the future by preserving local communities and attachments, perhaps integrating them with high-tech means of communication, avoiding further urban sprawl?

And then there is the sphere of international relations, where just as much innovation will be needed. At present there are few means of ensuring that countries which sign up to international agreements actually comply. What use is it for states to agree to set themselves targets if there is no way that they can be held to them? Regular monitoring of progress by an international body or bodies will help, but naming and shaming is likely to have only a marginal impact. More far-reaching sanctions have to be found, difficult though that task is in the face of the fact that states jealously guard their sovereignty.

Finally, even on the level of sheer negotiation Copenhagen-style agreements can only take us so far. Bilateral pacts will be extremely important, especially between China and the United States, the world's two biggest polluters. For instance, the US could agree to relax certain patent rights for the transfer of low-carbon technologies into China in exchange for trade concessions the

other way around. Regional agreements and plans will also be necessary, in all parts of the world, not just for mitigation but also for adapting to large-scale changes in weather patterns. I don't mean to be defeatist, but to endorse Hansen's call for action. Wherever we look there is an immense amount of work to be done and novel thinking required.

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