

Catching the wind of change



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High-level political will to tackle climate change as the defining challenge of our time emerged last year and a powerful wind is still blowing from societies, science and business to meet the climate challenge. Governments must now set full sail to capture that wind of change.

Indeed they can set those sails higher in Cancun. They can capture the pledges they have already made and begin to implement them. What is agreed — it can be fully appreciated — may not be at the level that science demands. But this is the next essential step in the right direction. Indeed, Governments have the opportunity and responsibility to build on past efforts in five key areas.

Firstly, they need to resolve what to do with their public pledges on emissions. All industrialized countries have pledged to cut them by 2020, while all major developing countries have submitted plans to limit their emissions growth.

A key question for Governments is how these pledges can be captured and entered in a binding way into an international agreement. But even if all current pledges were met on time, the response would remain inadequate in the longer term if the world is to keep within safer global temperature rises. So, more-stringent actions to reduce emissions cannot be much longer postponed. And industrialized nations must lead in taking them.

International agreements that incorporate effective mechanisms to speed up and scale up action between economies can undoubtedly help individual countries to raise their efforts to cut emissions. If they are to make progress, Governments also need to have a serious conversation about the Kyoto Protocol — the only existing international agreement with legal status to verify emission reductions — not least for the sake of clarity on the future of the carbon market.

Secondly, Governments seem to be on track to agree to a comprehensive set of ways and means that allow developing countries to take concrete climate action. These include adapting to climate change, limiting the growth of emissions, getting adequate finance, boosting the use of technology, promoting sustainable forestry and building up the skills and capacity to do all this. All developing countries require help to take these actions, but the poorest and most vulnerable among them need it most urgently.

Thirdly, industrialized nations can turn their pledges of funding into reality. Last year, they promised \$30 billion in fast-track financing for developing country efforts on adaptation and mitigation through 2012. Developing nations see the transparent and real allocation of this money as a critical signal that industrialized nations are committed to progress in the broader negotiations. Industrialised countries also pledged to find ways and means to raise \$100 billion per year by 2020.

Fourthly, countries want to see that what they agree with each other is measured, reported and verified in a transparent and accountable way. The concept of “MRV”, as it



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is called in the negotiations, is not complex: countries simply want to know that what they see is what they get. Progress here will be a gauge of whether countries are moving to common ground.

Finally, while Governments agree that pledges need to be captured in a binding manner, they still need to work out how to do it. Binding agreements among Governments can be on an international or national level, can be based on compliance with rules and regulations, or can involve a mix of these elements. Governments are currently considering them all.

Combining the last two elements — accountability and binding action — is essential if societies, science and business are to be confident that clean, green strategies are being pursued and will be rewarded globally, as well as locally.

Governments face no small challenge. What is at stake is the long-term, sustainable future of humanity. We know the milestones science has set — by when and by how much emissions must drop to have a chance of avoiding the worst. They require nothing less than an energy revolution both in production and consumption.

Governments have been building common ground since the UNFCCC began in Rio in 1992, and then at major gatherings in Berlin, Kyoto, Marrakesh, Bali, Copenhagen and now Cancun. The idea that a single magic, global agreement could solve all climate issues does not do justice to the crucial steps already achieved — and, most importantly, it dangerously ignores the need to keep innovating. In Cancun, Governments can harness the politically possible to achieve concrete and unmistakable progress.