

The Copenhagen Accord: What It Tells Us

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The international Copenhagen conference on climate change ended in the least ambitious result that anyone could have anticipated. It is not so much the fact that the “Copenhagen Accord” is a political declaration and, therefore, not binding that is really important. Its content and the way in which it is to be adopted are much more worrying, and in many ways disappointing. But they are especially indicative of the current complexity of the stakes involved, which have now at least been fully brought to light.



What the Accord doesn't say

The “Copenhagen Accord” was a disappointment especially because it essentially retains items already established in the Convention on Climate Change, to which the signatories of the Accord are in principle Parties (commitment to combating climate change; common but differentiated responsibilities, etc.)

More significant are those items not retained in the Accord: if the recognition of limiting the rise in global temperature to 3.6°F is mentioned, no date, neither a target date (2100 according to the IPCC), nor a reference date (the preindustrial period) is given. The same goes for the spike in emissions, which supposed to be addressed as soon as possible, through simple cooperation. And logically, no intermediate schedule for reducing greenhouse gas emissions is mentioned.

An absence of specific figures for the commitments made

A symbol of the very peculiar Conference of Parties in Copenhagen, the declaration that came out of it ends with two tables that were... left empty. States agreed to indicate their emission limits for 2020 by January 31, 2010 at the latest. We'll have to wait and see. Especially since a new column was added, in which to specify the base year selected.

That said, given the deadlocks that punctuated the Conference, this was no doubt the only way out of the impasse. The first table concerns the Annex I parties to the Convention (developed countries), which include the United States. This process at least has the merit of keeping the US at the table, of allowing it to record its commitments in precise figures, even within the meager limits acceptable to Congress, without having to revisit its position on the Kyoto Protocol, which it refuses.

The Annex I countries that are also Parties to the Kyoto Protocol will fill in the same table, while the second table concerns developing countries' planned reduction measures. The window of opportunity was narrow. And although open, it didn't lead to specific commitments on the part of the major emerging countries.

First steps towards financing

The mention of the financing aid accorded to developing countries by developed ones seems almost surprising in this context. It was backed up with some initial figures: around 30 billion dollars for 2010-2012 with the goal of raising 100 billion dollars per year starting in 2020.

But if the principle of MRV (Measure, Reporting, and Verification) controls and the inclusion of REDD+ mechanisms for reducing deforestation are included, no mechanisms for implementation are specified. The announced creation of a "Copenhagen Green Climate Fund" confuses the issue rather than offering a real structure for financing (multiple funding sources with unspecified distribution schemes, etc.).

The nature and lessons of the Accord

Legally, the "Copenhagen Accord" does not represent a decision of the Conference of the Parties, nor even a declaration that it is supposed to have adopted. It is a different kind of text all together, of which the Conference of the Parties have "taken note," signed by only thirty or so States, far from the 194 members to the Convention on Climate Change.

Since the future of the Kyoto Protocol went unmentioned, and the two avenues for negotiations were retained (within the framework of the Convention or that of the Protocol), the Accord opens the way for a "third way." As the condition of possibility for greater progress, perhaps; surely, as an additional element of complexity in an extremely tight timeframe for negotiations.

Plenty has been said about the reasons for this result: the inflexibility of the Danish chairman, the limits of the UN negotiating process, etc. The two weeks of the Copenhagen Conference also brought to light the reality of national unilateralism in fighting climate change as soon as it comes to implementation, and this despite a political consensus unique in history.

The Conference also especially showed how the balance of resource exploitation between North and South is changing, beyond technical issues and national economic conditions ■

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