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Developing ambitions

EU climate and energy targets can go even further, with collaboration with developing nations offering a valuable option, says Wendel Trio, Director of Climate Action Network Europe…

The EU has no real excuse for not increasing its emissions reduction pledge. With full implementation of current climate policies, the EU will probably overshoot its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions reduction target of 20%.[1] When implementing recently agreed policies to support the EU's 20% energy savings target, emissions will be reduced by up to 25%. Based on these numbers, it's easy to see that increasing the EU's GHG reduction target to 30%, which it has promised to do if other countries take on similar commitments, is also very achievable.

In 2008, the EU adopted its climate and energy package with its '20/20/20' targets: 20% emissions cuts, 20% reduction in primary energy use and 20% increase in the share of renewable energies in the energy mix, all by the year 2020. The EU decided to focus on the energy sector in its climate package because the lion's share of emissions come from energy production – in 2010, this sector was responsible for almost 80% of EU emissions.

The EU also enacted its pioneering Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) in 2005. This is a 'cap and trade' system, which allows major polluters to buy, sell and trade rights to pollute. The EU ETS was the first and biggest international scheme for the trading of greenhouse gas emission allowances, covering over 11,000 power stations and industrial plants in 30 countries.

When enacting its ETS, the EU saw the value of an international approach because, simply put, pollution does not respect national boundaries. In addition, it's often the countries that are emitting the least that face the most severe impacts, so an international strategy that puts the onus on the heavier emitters can help balance the scales.

Within the EU's own climate package, it enacted an Effort Sharing Decision, governing emissions from sectors not covered by the EU ETS, such as transport, housing, agriculture and waste. Under this decision each member state agreed to a binding national emissions limit for 2020 reflecting its relative wealth. The Effort Sharing Decision is another example of how a multicountry regime can help share the burden of reducing emissions based on ability and wealth.

The economic crisis is no excuse for delaying emissions cuts. Sir Nicholas Stern's landmark study on the economics of climate change found that tackling this problem would deliver 20 times the economic benefits of the required investments, such as reducing the economic impacts of ocean acidification and increased breathing disorders, to name just a few.[2] It would also create thousands of green jobs – the only sector that has seen job growth during the recession. If left unaddressed, climate change will have very serious impacts on future growth and development.

The EU has enacted a range of laws to address carbon emissions and complement the climate and energy package, including the Fuel Quality Directive, which directly addresses Canada's dirty tar sands oil, as well as other laws on emissions from agriculture, forests and refrigeration gases. In terms of overall efforts to reduce carbon emissions, the EU is doing better than many of its developed country counterparts, with both the USA and Canada failing to enact national climate legislation and reneging on their international commitments.

But instead of looking at the laggards as a reason not to raise ambitions, the EU should try to work better with those countries that are interested in preventing dangerous climate change. Countries like China, India, Brazil and South Africa have pledged emissions cuts three times greater than what has been promised by the EU.

The success of the summit in Durban is an example of how powerful an alliance between the EU and developing countries can be. We look to the EU to put more work into fostering successful collaborations with developing countries, starting by increasing its GHG reduction target to a more ambitious 30%, as that is what developing countries are asking. It's the only way we're going to get the global climate deal we need.

1 Below 1990 levels, by 2020. From the EU's 2008 Climate and Energy Package

2 http://mudancasclimaticas.cptec.inpe.br/~rmclima/pdfs/destaques/sternreview_report_complete.pdf

Wendel Trio
Director
Climate Action Network Europe
Tel: +32 (0)28 944670
info@caneurope.org
www.caneurope.org