



By Robert N. Stavins

Cancun Produces Meaningful Steps

This is a good time to reflect on the status of international negotiations to address the threat of global climate change. After the modest results of the talks in Copenhagen in December 2009, expectations were low for the follow-up negotiations in Cancun in December 2010.

But a funny thing happened on the way to that much-anticipated failure: After two weeks of discussions in the Mexican resort, the world's governments achieved consensus on a set of substantive steps forward. Equally important, participants showed encouraging signs of learning to navigate through the unproductive squabbling between developed and developing countries that derailed the Copenhagen talks.

As I wrote in an op-ed in *The Christian Science Monitor* (December 20, 2010), the tangible advances were noteworthy: The Cancun Agreements set emissions mitigation targets for some 80 countries, including all the major economies. The world's largest emitters, among them China, the United States, the European Union, India, and Brazil, signed up for targets and actions to reduce emissions by 2020.

The participating countries also agreed — for the first time in an official United Nations accord — to keep temperature increases below a global average of 2 degrees Celsius. Yes, that goal is no more stringent than the one

set out in Copenhagen, but this time the participating nations formally accepted the goals; a year earlier, they merely “noted” them, without adopting the accord.

The Cancun Agreements on their own are clearly not sufficient to keep temperature increases below 2 degrees Celsius, but they are a valuable step forward in the difficult process of constructing a sound foundation for meaningful, long-term global action.

The progress was as much about changing the mindset of how to tackle climate disruption. Significantly, the Cancun Agreements blur the distinction between industrialized and developing countries — a vital step to break through the rich-poor divide that has held up progress for years. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol assigned emission targets only to the 40 countries thought to be part of the industrialized world, which left the more than 140 nations of the developing world without any commitments. But today, more than 50 of those so-called developing countries have higher per capita income than the poorest of the countries with emission-reduction responsibilities under Kyoto.

Implicitly, the process in Cancun also recognizes that smaller, practical steps — some of which are occurring outside the United Nations climate process — are going to be more easily achievable, and thus more effective, than holding out for some overarching thunderclap in a global accord.

The Kyoto Protocol — the first commitment period of which ends in 2012 — divides the world into competing economic camps. At Cancun, it was encouraging to hear fewer people holding out for another commitment period for the protocol. It was politically impossible to spike the idea of extending the Kyoto agreement entirely, but at least it was punted to the next gathering in Durban, South Africa, a year from now. Otherwise, the Cancun meeting could have collapsed amid ac-

rimony and recriminations.

An essential goal in Cancun was for the parties to maintain sensible expectations and develop effective plans. That they met this challenge owes in good measure to the careful and methodical planning by the Mexican government, and to the tremendous skill of Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa in presiding over the talks.

At a critical moment she took note of objections from Bolivia and a few other leftist states, and then ruled that the support of the 193 other countries meant that consensus had been achieved and the Cancun Agreements had been adopted. She pointed out that “consensus does not mean unanimity.” Compare that with Copenhagen, where the Danish prime minister allowed objections by five small countries to derail the talks.

Mexico's adept leadership also made sure smaller countries were able to contribute fully and join any meetings they wanted, avoiding the sense of exclusivity that alienated some parties in Co-

penhagen. That's a sign that Mexico is one of the key “bridging states” that have credibility in both worlds. Another is South Korea. They will need to play key roles going forward.

It's also vital to note that China and the United States set a civil, productive tone, in contrast to the Copenhagen finger-pointing. From the sidelines in Cancun, I can vouch for the tremendous increase in openness of members of the Chinese delegation.

The acceptance of the Cancun Agreements suggests that the international community may now recognize that incremental steps in the right direction are better than acrimonious debates over unachievable targets.

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