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Climate policy as a construction kit – the Cancún summit hints at a future institutional architecture

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Bonn, Cancún, 13 December 2010. It could have been worse at the global climate policy building site. The Cancún summit closed at the weekend, having made considerable advances. Although, like Copenhagen before it, it failed to give birth to a binding treaty, the negotiators were able to agree on a number of aspects and adopt a large package of decisions.

They include a new attempt to extend or even to find a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in two years. As part of this negotiating timetable each industrialised country will submit a strategy for its low-carbon development. Moreover, the financial promises made in Copenhagen were finally carved in stone. By 2012 the developing countries will first receive US\$ 30 billion to support their climate efforts. By 2020 as much as US\$ 100 billion is to be mobilised each year. To this end, the industrialised and developing countries intend to spend the next few months negotiating on a sizeable climate fund with a fair distribution of votes. The delegates also set up a mechanism for disseminating climate-friendly technologies and a new framework programme for planning and implementing adaptation to climate change. Some important conceptual and methodological compromises were also reached on reducing emissions from deforestation and capacity-building in developing countries.

The surprisingly long list of results is the outcome of a new-found objectivity in the climate talks. The lesson learnt from the failure of the Copenhagen summit in December 2009 has given rise to a more realistic negotiating culture that turns the procedure hitherto applied on its head. In 1997 a highly abstract treaty was painfully agreed in Kyoto and then improved in years of laborious haggling over the details. In Cancún exactly the opposite happened: concrete decisions were given precedence, the 'grand design' left for another day. Progress was made by the building-block system: Where agreements could be reached, they were reached. Little time was spent waiting for compromises on more contentious issues. Here again, then, little progress was made in the main debate towards imposing on all the industrialised

countries a target for the reduction of their greenhouse gas emissions, but at least that ponderous and morally charged debate no longer stood in the way of other decisions.

So much unfinished business is unlikely to spark unbridled euphoria. Given the urgency of the problem of global warming, a gradualistic climate policy is still not enough. Yet, compared to the obituaries of recent months, the UN climate negotiations this time proved to be surprisingly robust and resolute. Quite a few observers had previously declared the overblown and overtaxed climate summit to be part of the problem. As a practicable alternative they extolled smaller, multilateral arenas, together with a stronger focus on national climate strategies. Such arenas include the G20 summit, the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate initiated by Washington and the growing number of technology partnerships.

But would such a mix of multilateral and national approaches, in other words an institutional patchwork outside the confines of the UN negotiations, really be more effective? A large number of external fora, with their fewer members and clearer agendas, are undoubtedly more manageable than a climate summit with a packed agenda and, currently, 194 contracting parties. In the smaller circle of the G20 or the G8+5 talks it has indeed been possible for some important initiatives on climate policy to be taken. Last year, for example, there was the joint declaration to limit average global warming to 2°C compared with pre-industrial levels. Such arenas also provide continuing opportunities for the greater involvement of laggards, especially the USA, who have never ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

The possible disadvantages are, of course, no less significant. First, industrialised and emerging countries are on their own in these smaller fora. Least developed countries and small island states, both particularly hard hit by global warming, are not invited. Their interests, and especially support for their efforts to adapt to climate change, are barely considered in these arenas. And second, adjacent, but unconnected, national greenhouse gas targets are no substitute for a common guide-

line and coordinated action. Even if all the assurances given so far for 2020 are added together, the industrialised countries will still exceed the level set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change by a massive 9 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide.

What form, then, should the future international climate architecture take? And how are the latest summit results to be interpreted in this respect? The legacy of Copenhagen was an end of utopia: global negotiations are no surprise packet from which an all-embracing treaty to rescue the climate can be conjured. And they have long since ceased to be the only arena in which international climate policy is made. The legacy of Cancún should be an end to defeatism: the UN climate summits are not a waste of time. As they are the fairest and most important decision-making fora for combating global warming, there is no substitute for them.

However, escaping the spiral of summit hysteria on the one hand and summit scepticism on the other is not a solution in itself. What will be needed at the next rounds of negotiations is a vision that looks well beyond the current piecemeal approach and the coexistence of various fora. In short, the aim must be balance and a division of labour. On the one hand, the global negotiations should continue to set the framework for international climate policy in the future – and

so serve as the point of reference and source of legitimacy for other arenas and national policies. This extends to all aspects which require a fair and universal basis of understandings, standards and conditions, such as global targets for greenhouse gas emissions, joint guidelines for financing instruments and an overarching compliance mechanism.

On the other hand, many technical points and details can be taken up more quickly and more competently by smaller fora. The existing partnerships for the dissemination of technologies should be joined by regional agreements on adaptation to the consequences of climate change. The various arenas must, of course, be coordinated more closely with the UN process. Cooperation agreements with the Climate Secretariat would be one way of optimising the distribution of tasks and also ensuring commitment to common principles. Finally, the coordination of different climate policies might be achieved at national level, on the spot in other words, rather than burdening the global negotiations with the task.

The Cancún summit has supplied some important building blocks for this improved division of labour among the various institutions – no more, but no less, either. The aim must now be to join the parts together so that climate policy does not remain a permanent building site.



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