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Geneva climate talks: what to expect?

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LIVE FROM GENEVA –

The negotiations for a new climate agreement are starting again today in Geneva. What to expect? Last year, the Lima conference adopted a draft text for the new agreement. This contains all the key options, but also shows the high degree of divergence that remains. The objective for Geneva will be therefore to clean and clarify the text, purging it of unnecessary overlapping concepts, structuring the different options and defining the key remaining political decisions.

We should leave Geneva with a clearer, more streamlined text that can be submitted in May as the draft for the 2015 agreement. We shouldn't expect substantive breakthroughs to be reflected in the text at this stage.

On the face of it this sounds banal. Why is it so hard? Of course there are hard issues and often divergent interests at stake. But more than this, countries are engaged in a difficult exercise of communication, indeed an exercise of imagination, between themselves. One of the things that makes countries hesitant is the fact that this agreement is intended to structure long-term climate cooperation. However, the 2015 agreement itself will contain just the main targets, institutions and principles; the operational details will be defined later. Countries are therefore reticent to give what they fear could be a 'blank cheque', without having a clear and, importantly, shared idea of how the regime will actually function in the long-term. Countries are talking about a mechanism to ratchet up ambition, but how will it work in practice? How will the system for mobilizing finance work in the new agreement? Or transparency?

Developing answers to these questions takes time, of course, between so many countries. Progress on cleaning up the text is crucial in Lima. But equally important is that countries get into the details of their proposals, at a level as operational as possible, so that others can understand what they would be signing up to.

There are a couple of areas where discussions in Geneva can help us to define more areas of convergence. The first is on the idea of having a dynamic agreement. The meta-question here is whether we will continue with bottom-up 'nationally determined' contributions, or whether we will have some more top-down elements of review. The latter makes some countries nervous. Perhaps some middle ground could be found around the idea of clearly defined cycles of nationally-determined contributions, combined with a review of strategic review of progress on transformation at the global level, which could feed into discussions on how to improve the global cooperative framework, for example on technologies, finance or adaptation in subsequent rounds of collective action. It's clear that it could be useful to have an opportunity for periodic 'strategic stocktaking' at the global level. However, rather than being focused on the 'ambition gap', it could be good to focus this more on the 'opportunity gap', i.e. how stronger international collaboration in specific areas can create opportunities and confidence for stronger contributions from countries over time.

A second area where progress in Geneva could be made is on the 'scope' of future cycles: should they apply to just mitigation, or also to adaptation, finance, technology and transparency? Global climate collaboration needs to be framed more broadly than just emissions: the challenge and benefits of collective action are much broader. In this sense, future cycles should cover all elements of the agreement, while taking into account specific differences in the nature of the challenges of adaptation, mitigation, finance and technology. Here the concept of national contributions can be built on as a flexible tool for countries to describe in a transparent way their strategies in each of these areas.