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COP25 needs to shape the increase in collective ambition

Auteur

Lola Vallejo

Climate Special Adviser

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Raising collective ambition on climate change requires countries to submit by the end of next year higher commitments to reduce emissions over the coming decade. The ambition champions—among which the Chilean Presidency of COP25, the UN Secretary General, the countries who already committed to net-zero emissions and are highly vulnerable to climate impacts—will use Madrid’s conference to convince other countries, particularly large emitters, to submit NDCs that best captures their ‘highest possible ambition’. Achieving this requires discussing under which conditions other countries would see enhanced NDCs a plausible future, including through international support and cooperation, and an increased consideration of social justice. As countries probe each other’s intentions in the corridors of Madrid’s COP, what should be taken as a hallmark for ambition in the upcoming NDCs? Several recent IDDRI publications shed light on this.

When signing the Paris Agreement, countries agreed to enhance national commitments every five years to reflect their 'highest possible ambition' to limit global warming to well-below 2°C and pursuing efforts towards 1.5°C above pre-industrial period. Since then, science has made clearer the drastic reductions needed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, but the geopolitical state of play is much less conducive to multilateral climate action. As the 2020 deadline for communicating enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) is nearing, there is little indication that large emitters are still firmly committed to enhancing their contribution. To date, countries that sent a clear signal for enhancement represent under 10% of global emissions¹ and only the Marshall Islands submitted an enhanced NDC. There is even less detail on whether the content of NDCs will be close to matching the 50% reduction in CO₂ emissions compared to 2010 that IPCC says is necessary to limit the worst impacts of climate change in its special report on 1.5°C. Current NDCs submitted pre-Paris are, almost by definition, insufficient to meet the Agreement's goals. Their full implementation would only put us on a path to a 3°C world or more, far from the warming threshold of well-below 2°C, let alone 1.5°C. Key emitters are still keeping their cards close to their chest, but many expect the EU and China to make or break COP26's success. But the EU, where the new President-elect of the Commission vocally supports raising the 40% target towards a 50% to 55% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2030, is unsure of the process for submitting its NDC, or of how it will offer Member States to reach that new target. Considering that China represents over a quarter of global emissions and its investments abroad shape the future carbon intensity of many countries, its next NDC will be particularly scrutinised. But how should countries design their enhanced NDCs, and how should their ambition be assessed?

Looking only at short-term changes in emissions to assess effectiveness would be a mirage. In the run-up to Paris, global energy-related CO₂ emissions stagnated for a few years and even modestly declined in key world regions (EU, US, India and China), raising hopes the world was close to an emissions peak that were later crushed by the continued growth since 2016. As a recent study ([Spencer et al., 2019](#)) shows, the good news is: neither trends were a good indicator of the effectiveness of climate action. We need better structural and financial indicators to assess it. The bad news is, upon a closer look, the energy transition has yet to begin globally. There has been some progress in decarbonising electricity but it remains too slow and driven by superficial low-hanging fruits without long-term perspectives such as coal-to-gas switch. There is no discernible transition in other sectors such as transport, buildings or industry globally.

Looking at an NDC scope can be a first clue of enhanced ambition ([Robiou du Pont & Vallejo, 2019](#)). Going beyond a headline emissions target to include sectoral strategies and targets adds transparency and credibility to it and facilitates its implementation. On the energy sector, considering the projected growth in energy demand in most countries, committing to reduce fossil consumption matters more than commitments to increase renewables capacity by itself. Countries should design separate strategies for the reduction of non-CO₂ gases, such as the HFCs (hydrofluorocarbons) from cooling or methane from agriculture and fossil energy production. Although GHG inventories are limited to a country's territory, nothing prevents countries' NDCs to start pledging to tackle their emissions beyond their borders, such as from international aviation and shipping, or including the impact of their public foreign investment decisions. This is even truer for China, as the magnitude of the Chinese fossil fuel investment under the Belt and Road Initiative alone could jeopardise the Paris Agreement in the absence of greener standards.²

Designing a long-term strategy for low-carbon development (LTS) is another key way to ensure NDCs are not closing options for the deep decarbonisation required ([Robiou du Pont & Vallejo, 2019](#)). Despite different starting points, national contexts and preferences, a truly ambitious NDC should ultimately be steeped towards reaching net zero emissions for all greenhouse gases in the second half of the century, as there are no other end point for serious climate action. As shown under the Deep Decarbonization Pathways Initiative,³ LTSs offer an opportunity to explore several decarbonisation pathways at the sectoral level: they can help clarify the acceptable menu of options for each country, go beyond simply projecting the incremental deployment of low-carbon technologies, and consider demand

and production options ([Briand & Waisman, 2019](#)). Crucially, LTSs offer an opportunity to organise society-wide consultations to ensure economic and social factors are an integral part of the development strategy.

¹ Climate Watch www.climatewatchdata.org/2020-ndc-tracker

² Tsinghua University Center for Finance and Development, Vivid Economics and the Climateworks Foundation (2019). Decarbonizing the Belt and Road: A Green Finance Roadmap.

³ ddpinitiative.org and Waisman et al. (2019). A pathway design framework for national low greenhouse gas emission development strategies, in Nature Perspectives.

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