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Carbon neutrality starts today: the importance of LTS for robust climate multilateralism

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Net-zero (NZ) emissions goals have increasingly been in the news. In just the past year, the USA and China announced their intent to reach carbon neutrality, and other major developing nations, such as India and

Indonesia, are publicly considering it. This undeniable progress towards a shared vision of tomorrow's world has also been met by a fair amount of skepticism: mid-century targets seem for some commentators too easy a commitment, as they often fail to give rise to a clear vision of how to get there and take the necessary steps to achieve this vision. Long-term strategies are a key tool to provide answers on how the transition and the transformation of a country is going to happen, starting now. So where does the international community stand on long-term strategies? And why and how should they be connected with the international climate negotiations?

The concept of carbon neutrality has also raised numerous questions in each country where it has become a public conversation, as all segments of society and levels of government seek to better understand the specific short-term implications of such commitments and their respective roles in achieving them. Internationally, diplomatic teams look for arguments to defend an individual country-specific NZ goal date. Answering these questions requires working on specific pathways to decarbonize an economy in the next decades. Hence, there have been numerous calls on governments to complement their neutrality pledges by developing and communicating robust long-term plans to provide means for exploration, deliberation and socialization. However, the international mandate that spurred long-term strategies since the adoption of the Paris Agreement expires in 2020. Art 4.19 invites all Parties to formulate and communicate long-term low-emission development strategies (LT-LEDS). This article does not provide the framework for the continuous work that is required going forward, because existing COP decisions call on countries to submit these documents by a specific year (2020). This blogpost presents the set of reasons provided by different actors on the importance and usefulness for the international community (or the UN Climate Convention) to make this a standing invitation.

Who is calling for LT-LEDS, and why?

Some countries have already developed long-term strategies and experienced firsthand the domestic benefits of completing the exercise. In short, it allows governments to organize the domestic process on long-term climate goals, frame the debate and build a legitimate domestic narrative on the transition to a zero-carbon future. Stakeholders brought into the process can help determine a target year to reach net-zero,¹ as well as milestones on the way that are consistent with the countries' capacities, constraints and development priorities, thus formulating a credible strategy. When countries do engage deeper in the exercise and pursue a constructive agenda with precise outcomes, they incur additional benefits (Waisman *et al.*, 2021), including the possibility to provide a strategic perspective on national public policy and necessary short-term shifts,² investment decisions or areas for international cooperation based on a coherent development and climate agenda, and finally, serving as a tool to create and sustain an inclusive dialogue between different domestic stakeholders to build a consensual vision for view of the transition (Waisman *et al.*, 2021; WRI & UNDP, 2021). For some countries, such as the Least Developed Countries (LDC), these domestic benefits can also crystallise through the lenses of the international negotiations, as LT-LEDS “can also reinforce links between development, mitigation and adaptation—the embodiment of Article 2 of the Paris Agreement” (IIED, 2021).

Businesses, investors, cities, states and regions also want to understand and shape the sectoral transformations envisioned by countries; they need visibility on major policy decisions so they can anticipate and develop their own net-zero transition strategies, aligned with their country or their sector. Specifically, investors, banks, and Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs) are keen to use long-term strategies as proxies for investment plans as well as an opportunity to align their portfolio to be fully compatible with the Paris Agreement and reduce their exposure to transition risks.

When discussing long-term strategies' relevance, think tanks, NGOs, and other experts look for proof of credibility of net-zero political announcements, as well as safeguards for avoiding undesirable short-term decisions that would lead to carbon lock-in and stranded assets, which may jeopardize the achievement of the Paris long-term goals, including the 1.5°C target. Requesting countries submit an LT-LEDS to the UNFCCC builds pressure on economies, not only to set net-zero commitments but also to demonstrate how they intend to deliver them over time (IIED, 2021). The science community, including IPCC, also asks for granular country-level inputs in order to enrich global assessments, and make them most useful to derive forward-looking recommendations (Torres Gunfaus & Waisman, 2021). Finally, civil society at large, which is often ahead of politicians in terms of ambition and tired of dealing with uncertainty, also demands clarity and participation in setting long-term directions.

Most recently, [the G7 Summit Communiqué](#) reaffirmed G7 leaders' commitment to submitting long-term strategies that set out concrete pathways to net-zero GHG emissions by 2050 and to update them regularly, to reflect science, technological change and market developments. It also called on all countries to present specific and credible strategies for achieving carbon neutrality, including through long-term strategies, and to provide support to the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change with their preparation and implementation.

What is expected from this renewed invitation for LT-LEDS?

As highlighted earlier, it is important to extend the invitation for the elaboration of LT-LEDS at COP26. A renewed call for LT-LEDS at COP26 would:

- Encourage Parties to continue working on long-term strategies, including by providing human and financial resources to support that effort. Only [29 Parties have communicated LT-LEDS](#) to date, but many are working on it. Those who have submitted one recognize the need to build these strategies as 'living documents', as a basis for regular Nationally Determined Contribution (NDCs) enhancement and revising domestic policies and regulations—which proves the distinct value of an LT-LEDS as a process (Waisman et al., 2021, 2021). Renewing this call for LT-LEDS would allow countries to benefit from lessons learned domestically and around the world, which would likely translate into major qualitative improvements, particularly as this tool helps catalyze national climate action.
- Anchor LT-LEDS in the UNFCCC architecture so that it can complement NDCs and allows a more thorough assessment of progress and opportunities going forward during the Global Stocktake (GST) by serving as an input—in addition to inform future LT-LEDS revision. Indeed, as input to the GST, it helps understand the levers of short-term ambition based on granular country-driven long-term perspectives (Waisman et al., 2021; Torres Gunfaus & Waisman, 2021), which is precisely the type of input that is expected according to existing COP agreements, namely around barriers, challenges and opportunities to enhance international cooperation. It would also remain consistent with the Party-driven approach of UNFCCC discussions, as reflected in the [recent non-paper by SBSTA and SBI chairs](#) to prepare for the GST.

So, what is next?

The need to support continuous work on LT-LEDS has been largely discussed by the climate community of practice outside the context of the UNFCCC negotiations. The rationale has been captured by experts (WRI, 2020; Waisman et al., 2021, paper based on the international [DDP community experience](#)).

But if experts clearly see the benefits, details of a potential international mandate still need to be discussed by Parties to the UN Climate Change Convention. Many countries, even beyond the members of the [Carbon Neutrality](#)

Coalition, now feel that designing a pathway to net zero is an invaluable tool to accelerate implementation and to position their domestic agendas in the context of materializing the global ambition. The UK COP26 Presidency needs to seize this moment and put the question on the agenda so that efforts over the past five years are maintained and the gap between current trajectories and limiting temperature increase to 1.5°C shrinks swiftly over time. An upcoming Ministerial meeting in July convened by the UK COP26 Presidency will bring a representative group of ministers together to sketch the desired and balanced outcome from Glasgow that will keep 1.5 °C alive. This meeting could provide the first opportunity for Parties to explore how LT-LEDS may be taken up at the next COP and to valorise them as a cornerstone of the implementation of Art. 2 defining the purpose of the Paris Agreement.

To this end, we need a series of dialogues between countries to hear directly from them how they perceive the opportunities brought by LT-LEDS as well as the costs and other concerns associated with this effort. This is key to grasp what the levers of a potential resistance to extending the mandate could be. The 2050 Pathways Platform, IDDRI and WRI are initiating this effort ahead of the G20 Summit, with an event organized on July 6, hoping that this gathering of the major economies will reaffirm the value of this instrument and will call all groups of countries to further endorse the mandate of LT-LEDS, so we can work to build a broad coalition ahead of COP26.

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¹ It does not have to be 2050 for everyone.

² This is particularly true for carbon intensive export-based economies which need to diversify their economy.