



BLOG POST September 9th 2021

Assessing climate ambition: getting the full picture beyond emission numbers

Authors

Henri Waisman

Director, Deep Decarbonization Pathways programme

Marta Torres Gunfaus

Director, Climate Programme

Anna Pérez Català

Senior Research Fellow, International Climate Governance

 Reading time: 9 min



The conversation on climate ambition is at a crossroads in 2021. It is time to assess the progress enabled by the Paris Agreement and to use this momentum to inform the future phases of the ratchet-up process, with the 2023 Global Stocktake in sight. The analysis of emission targets, notably the enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to be submitted by COP26 in November, will help measure to what extent future commitments and actions should be strengthened compared to current trends. But, to inform the

“how” question—how could this strengthening be concretely operationalized?—a more granular and context-specific analysis of trends and progress of national and sectoral transformations is needed. In a [collective report coordinated](#) by IDDRI, a group of 40 experts worldwide follow this approach to assess the evolution of climate ambition in 26 countries and 3 hard-to-abate sectors (land use, transport, industry). This analysis highlights where developments have been going in the right direction, where they should be accelerated and where major tensions remain. It contributes to the process of collective learning in support of the progressive increase of ambition, by indicating key issues for future collective conversations as emerging from country and sector perspectives.

The diagnosis on the state of climate action is unambiguous: we are collectively behind on ambition and implementation if we are to reach the Paris Climate Agreement collective goal to “hold[...] the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels”. The commitments, notably from countries as formulated in enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) submitted to the UNFCCC by November 2021, are likely to be insufficiently ambitious. And concrete strategies and actions adopted by countries and other actors on the ground are often not sufficient to achieve these NDC targets.

No doubt that this diagnosis will set the tone of the conversations in the lead-up and during COP26, highlighting the need to increase long-term ambition and to provide convincing evidence of commitments to accelerate action in the immediate and short term to give effect to this ambition.

But, as important as it can be, this alarming diagnosis is only one leg of the ambition mechanism created by the Paris Agreement. The other leg is to build on the lessons that can be learnt from the past and current trends to imagine the solutions for the increase of ambition and accelerated action on the ground. This learning process is at the core of the progressive ratchet-up approach of the Paris Agreement.

A detailed look at the recent evolution of discourses, governance and concrete actions in a diversity of countries and the analysis of the content of sectoral transformations highlight number of best practices to be shared and obstacles to be overcome, which define the priorities for the climate conversation in the coming years, both domestically and internationally.

Strengthening national and sectoral processes to design actionable strategies

The Paris Agreement has initiated a notable movement in many countries and sectors. Carbon neutrality, which was barely discussed beyond experts before its introduction in the Paris Agreement, has become an established reference frame to guide action for a growing number of actors. To operationalize this new reference frame, new assessment frameworks and governance processes must be put in place. Indeed, carbon neutrality forces to revisit the way actions are assessed, going beyond the evaluation of their effect on short-term emission reductions to consider their dynamic role in the transformation towards a net-zero society. And as it forces to consider rapid and far-reaching transformations with important socio-economic consequences and potential bifurcations in the direction of the whole society, carbon neutrality calls for comprehensive and open societal debates. Some countries have started this process of operationalization, but it remains largely undeveloped in many others. Accelerating this movement should be a key priority in the coming years, building notably on lessons learnt by frontrunners. This would notably be a key condition to enable the design by countries and business of strategies suited to guide concretely short-term decision-making. The lack of strategies that are sufficiently detailed, ambitious and actionable

and that capture the full set of opportunities and constraints of carbon neutrality for different actors is indeed a key gap in the current international toolbox for climate ambition.

Rethinking international cooperation to support national and sectoral transformations

The Paris Agreement has marked a shift in the approach to the collective climate problem, moving away from burden sharing towards cooperative approaches. Yet, the practical translation of this paradigm shift in enhanced international cooperation is still limited in scale and scope, despite its potential for more ambitious climate targets and actions. This gap can be better understood when acknowledging that, in the bottom-up paradigm of the Paris Agreement, countries' and sectors' needs for the implementation of their transition should be put at the centre, by opposition with a more top-down approach to these global discussions. This in turn requires revisiting significantly the approach to international cooperation, both inside and outside the UNFCCC, which should be a core objective of the international community in the coming years.

Three roles of international cooperation should receive attention: sharing, pooling, aligning.

Sharing experience and best practices across countries and actors could increase confidence in the possibility for more ambitious targets and understanding of the necessary policy actions to meet them. The assessment of recent practical progress in countries and sectors highlights the existence of a variety of workable actions and policies, in discussion or already in place. Nonetheless, deriving useful lessons from these specific examples to support change at scale is challenging, due to the extraordinary diversity of governance and economic conditions, gaps and barriers in countries and sectors.

Pooling resources is fundamental to support and accelerate the emergence of innovative solutions. Enhanced cooperation on technologies, for example, would allow a given country to specialise in specific technologies where it has a comparative advantage rather than trying to cover the development of all the technologies required for decarbonization. Adequate transfer mechanisms can also allow developing countries with limited resources to benefit from the best innovations, which would be critical to allow them to leapfrog the transition. But the international innovation process still lacks a clear direction and structure consistent with the needs of the carbon neutrality objective.

Finally, aligning international trade and finance with the requirement of the national and sectoral transition is an essential lever of the global transition. Revised trade agreements could support cooperation along the value chain instead of competition in final goods, maintaining economic activity where it is most efficient. And mobilizing the trillions needed for country and sectoral transitions towards carbon neutrality also requires a drastic evolution of the finance sector, through innovative finance mechanisms and more explicit and transparent investment plans and enhanced project readiness.

Organizing sectoral conversations to accelerate the transition in countries and globally

In all sectors, significant progress on technologies and technical options have been visible over the past few years. New and innovative solutions are emerging, which, if deployed at scale, would create opportunities for structural transitions that could hardly have been envisaged a few years ago in all key sectors. In most cases, the challenge lies now in the implementation of the transition which in turn requires more structured coordination of actions between different actors and the design of well-conceived policy packages combining the levers of actions available

to these different actors. The establishment of sectoral conversations gathering a variety of actors to discuss the concrete modalities for implementing ambitious transitions should be a key priority of the international community in the coming years.

For example, the transition towards almost net-zero carbon transport cannot be achieved only with more efficient or low-carbon vehicles. It requires more fundamentally major shifts in both mobility demand and supply which cannot but result from a combination of economic incentives, spatial and urban planning, new organization of production and consumption, infrastructure deployment lifestyle changes, etc. The coordination between national and local governments, business, investors and citizens is a pre-requisite for this purpose.

The Paris Agreement has also completely transformed the climate policy debate for heavy industry. Recent progress shows that decarbonization for several critical heavy industries (steel, chemicals, cement, for instance) is technically possible, and would not impose significant costs on the wider economy. But concrete implementation requires a major shift in national-level and global industrial and trade policies which in turn cannot happen without structured cooperation between governments and business both inside countries and in different countries to organize the evolution of the supply chain where relevant.

Finally, the agriculture and land use sectors face important political and institutional barriers affecting decision-making and implementation, which would require strengthening both domestic actions and international cooperation and enhancing coordination among a diversity of actors. In particular, the heterogeneity of carbon sink potential from forest and other land uses across countries and the necessity to conserve and expand ecosystems holding sinks of global importance for reaching the Paris goals requires at once local solutions for working with socio-ecological systems, and global cooperation to pool resources and addressing international drivers of change.

The ball is in the court of the international processes: why we still need high level political negotiations

When looking at the details of the situation inside countries and sectors, public awareness of climate change has risen dramatically, the Paris Agreement has indeed triggered important changes in processes and actions, many of which go in the right direction for achieving the global climate goal. Short- and long-term decarbonization strategies and roadmaps for action have been prepared in numerous countries, at government, regional and local levels; the integration of Non-States Actors into participatory processes has improved; climate-related governance bodies have been created; and accountability of main actors (governments, business) has strengthened.

The overall ecosystem of climate action has evolved. However, progress is (still) largely insufficient and too slow and that the movement must get accelerated drastically in the coming years. As explained hereabove, sharing, pooling and aligning are about coordination efforts at the technical level, but many of these decisions, and in particular the alignment of finance and trade, require very high level political involvement. Thus, many of the enabling conditions for this acceleration at the national and sectoral levels depend on the mobilisation of high level decision-makers to find the political agreement that will unlock transition processes in national contexts or in sectors. The careful design and implementation of international processes should receive strong attention in order to establish them as an active support for future increase of ambition and enhanced action by countries and sectors: to set the accountability frameworks right and enable technical cooperation, but also first and foremost to open the right space for the necessary high level political deals that need to be found to bolster transformative action in countries and in sectors.