



Progress from the Copenhagen Accord

A Good Start to Global Progress on Climate Safety

[Andrew Light](#) February 9, 2010

This past December, 192 countries gathered for the 15th meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark. Ambitions for the Copenhagen meeting were high. UNFCCC members had agreed at their 13th meeting in Bali, Indonesia in 2007 that December 2009 would be the deadline to determine a course of action forward on a plan for global reduction of carbon dioxide emissions following the end of the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol in 2012.

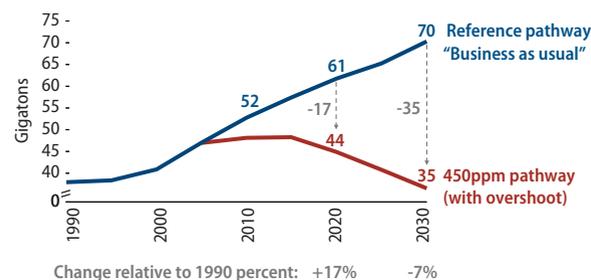
The UNFCCC's midterm goal for climate safety is stabilizing temperature change increase caused by humans to no more than 2 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. According to analysis from Project Catalyst hitting this goal requires a 17 gigaton decrease in annual greenhouse gas emissions to 44 gigatons per year from the projected increase of global emissions of 61 gigatons by 2020 if we continue polluting at current rates (Figure 1).

The tense two weeks of negotiations in Copenhagen—preceded by an intense year of international negotiations once the Obama administration came into office—resulted in the creation of the Copenhagen Accord. This is not yet a legally binding agreement, but it does fulfill President Barack Obama's promise prior to the Copenhagen summit that the United States was committed to getting a political agreement out of the meeting that could be implemented immediately and serve as the first step in a process to eventually produce a new international accord setting us on a pathway to climate safety.

Among the accord's virtues are its commitment to limiting humanly caused temperature increases to no more than 2 degrees Celsius with a promise to investigate the feasibility of holding temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. It also includes a pledge of \$30 billion in "quick start" financing from developed countries by 2012 to assist developing countries with adaptation to a warmer world and transition to a low-

FIGURE 1
Revised global greenhouse gas emissions

Gigatons of CO2 equivalent emissions, per year



Source: McKinsey Global GHG Abatement Cost Curve v2.0; Houghton; IEA; US EPA; den Elzen, van Vuuren; Project Catalyst analysis

carbon economy. Progress was made in reconciling differing interpretations—primarily between the United States and China—on standards for measuring, reporting, and verifying reductions. But most importantly the accord provides for the first time an avenue for developing countries to make commitments for emission reductions, which is particularly important for moving beyond the Kyoto Protocol’s old divisions between expectations for reductions from developed and developing countries. Yet the accord is as of yet incomplete given the lack of emission reduction targets for different parties, the inconclusive determination about whether it will become a legally binding agreement, and a robust plan for how compliance with commitments for reductions will be enforced.

These gaps will be addressed over the next year of negotiations, but the accord has already provided us with the information needed to determine where we are on the path to achieving climate safety. The initial deadline for submitting commitments under the Copenhagen Accord was this past January 31. According to the UNFCCC, 92 countries, including the 27-member European Union, have now made commitments to the accord, representing over 80 percent of global emissions.

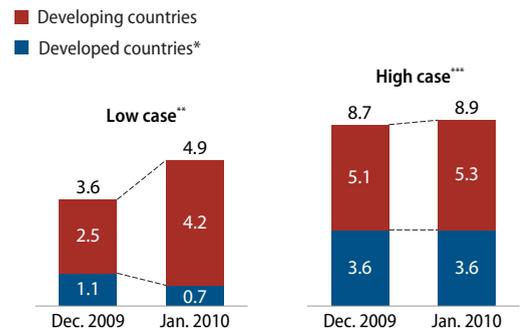
Submissions so far by parties signing on to the Copenhagen Accord show improvement compared to modeling from Project Catalyst and analysis by the Center for American Progress prior to the Copenhagen summit of existing commitments for reductions by the world’s largest emitters. The high end of proposals for reductions from all countries under the accord has gone from 8.7 gigatons of abatement by 2020 compared to a business-as-usual scenario up to 8.9 gigatons of reductions. The low end of proposals has improved from 3.6 gigatons to 4.9 gigatons, contingent, for example, on whether the United States will meet its stated commitment to emission reductions and whether developed countries provide sufficient financial incentives for developing countries to meet their targets.

According to Project Catalyst, emission reductions on the low end have improved largely due to countries such as Brazil and Indonesia strengthening their own direct commitments for reductions, rather than, for example, only providing a less expensive offset market through deforestation projects for developed countries. These figures also still include the pre-Copenhagen commitments from major emitting countries in the developing world such as China and India to reduce their emissions by 13 percent and 19 percent respectively below a “business-as-usual” growth in emissions (Figure 2).

With other smaller changes in global emissions projections—including a decrease due to the recent economic downturn and reduced emissions from deforestation and loss of peat lands—the high-end abatement path so far from the Copenhagen Accord commitments leaves us only 5 gigatons short of the 44 gigaton goal by 2020—two-thirds of the reductions needed to achieve climate safety (Figure 3).

FIGURE 2
Commitments to emission reductions

Reduction in emissions versus BAU, Gt CO₂e per year, 2020



* The developed country emissions reduction commitments exclude 1.5 Gt of reduction as a result of the economic crisis.

** “Low case” refers to the low end of commitments by countries provided to the UNFCCC on January 31, 2010. For the United States, a separate “low case” is estimated due to uncertainty on the passage of the current climate change legislation which assumes United States only adopts mitigation initiatives currently announced.

*** “High case” refers to the high-end of commitments provided to the UNFCCC on January 31, 2010.

Source: Project Catalyst analysis.

The current submissions under the Copenhagen Accord are not yet sufficient to limit warming to 2 degrees Celsius according to this analysis, but they are by no means the end of the story. The January 31 deadline for submissions under the accord is soft and allows for submissions to come in during the year. There is also ample room for improvement in our global emissions profile as we move toward the next UNFCCC meeting, which begins at the end of November in Cancun, Mexico. Consider the following:

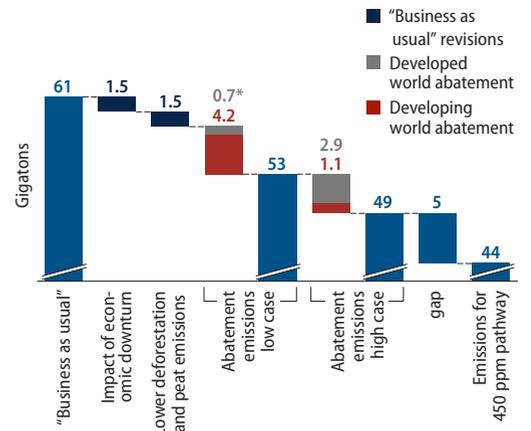
Many will complain that the Copenhagen meeting did not achieve its goal of delivering a new final climate agreement. But it avoided a much worse outcome, namely locking in a legally binding agreement that would not reach climate safety. If the current submissions under the Copenhagen Accord were final for a new climate agreement then it would be difficult if not impossible to improve the ambition for additional emission reductions as we move forward. Instead, as President Obama intended, the accord is only the beginning of a process to achieve the reductions in climate pollution that we need. Given that the accord commits parties to the 2 degree Celsius goal of achieving climate safety, the logical next step in the process—agreeing on emission reduction goals under the accord—will need to be tied to that temperature goal.

There is also reason for optimism because it is very likely that the United States can deliver the necessary reductions even if Congress fails to deliver on comprehensive climate and energy legislation this year. The low-case scenario in this analysis is primarily a function of whether the United States can achieve its goal of achieving a 17 percent cut below 2005 emission levels by 2020. This figure represents reductions from the economy-wide cap-and-trade mechanism in the Waxman-Markey legislation passed by the House of Representatives last summer. If the United States cannot meet this goal, as is modeled on the low-end scenario here, then other countries will likely only achieve the low end of their ambitions as well. But what these figures do not take into account is that if this happens the administration will still be required to begin the process of reducing carbon emissions under the auspices of the Clean Air Act, thus increasing the likelihood that we will reach the high-end scenario. Estimates now show that individual states alone will already deliver 7 percent of reductions commensurate with this 17 percent goal from their policies alone, leaving only 10 percent needed from executive action at the federal level.

If the Senate does pass legislation that mirrors some of the important provisions in the House climate legislation, then the United States can deliver additional reductions that could overcome the 5 gigaton gap between the high end of these reductions and climate safety. The high-end scenario here only models the 17 percent reduction from an economy-wide measure such as a cap-and-trade program as the extent of the U.S. contribution to

FIGURE 3
Emissions under current proposals

Gt of CO₂e emissions per year, 2020



* The 0.7 Gt of abatement from developed countries is on top of 1.5 Gt of reduction as a result of the economic crisis.

Source: McKinsey Global GHG Abatement Cost Curve v2.0; Project Catalyst analysis.

global carbon abatement. It does not count additional reductions that will be achieved under the House legislation such as the 0.7 gigatons of reductions from direct assistance to international forestry programs. We previously calculated that this program would improve the U.S. reductions from 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020 to a reduction of 11 percent below 1990 levels of emissions. This is all the more reason to press for successful action in the Senate, which, if similar steps are taken to preserve these measures, can achieve almost a full gigaton of the additional reductions needed by 2012 to close the 5 gigaton gap between the high end of the Copenhagen Accord submissions and the path to climate safety.

Many are determined to see the outcome of Copenhagen as a failure, but this analysis reveals a different picture: a good start in this new year to the reductions needed in climate pollution and a clearer pathway on how to meet our global goals.

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