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LATIN AMERICA: Climate change progress requires aid

OxResearch Daily Brief Service. (Jan 20, 2015).



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Abstract

Latin America's climate change action.

The agreement reached during the 20th session of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 20) held in Lima in December 2014 committed all countries, developed and developing, to make public their commitments to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These will form the basis for the crucial next session (COP 21) in Paris this December. However, political and economic factors reduce the chances of a legally binding agreement emerging from the process, providing wriggle room for those governments not wanting to meet their future commitments.

Full Text

SUBJECT:Latin America's climate change action.

SIGNIFICANCE:The agreement reached during the 20th session of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 20) held in Lima in December 2014 committed all countries, developed and developing, to make public their commitments to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. These will form the basis for the crucial next session (COP 21) in Paris this December. However, political and economic factors reduce the chances of a legally binding agreement emerging from the process, providing wriggle room for those governments not wanting to meet their future commitments.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Countries in the region will face growing international pressure to publicise new or revised commitments to cutting emissions post-2020.

If targets are to be met, countries with significant rainforests will have to improve on their logging records.

The increasing budget deficits of many countries in the region will make the adaptation to climate impacts even harder.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) entered into force in 1994, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere. The Conference of the Parties (COP) was designated as the Convention's supreme governing body.

The key element of the COP Lima accord is that it ends the division of the world into developed and developing countries. In 1997 Kyoto Protocol, for example, required only developed countries to act and did not demand anything of developing nations, which included some of the largest GHG emitters. The Lima accord, by contrast, requires every nation to put forward a detailed domestic policy plan to limit its emissions from burning coal, gas and oil.

The next step is that each country designs its commitments to action, known as 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (INDCs). INDCs will be based on common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities in light of different national circumstances.

Richer countries are expected to outline plans for cuts in emissions from 2020, whereas developing countries may only have to announce when emissions will peak (China) or cut emissions more slowly (poorer countries).

Regional commitments.

In total, Latin America accounts for roughly 11% of global GHG emissions. Its ability to have a major impact on bringing down emissions -- unlike the United States or China -- is therefore limited.

Some countries in the region have already made voluntary pledges to cut emissions which cover the period before and after 2020. They now have to publicise their plans for the post-2020 period. However, serious doubts remain as to whether these countries will meet their 2020 targets:

Brazil.

The world's fourth-largest emitter has passed into legislation a voluntary target of cuts in emissions by 36-39% before 2020. Annual emissions from 2004 to 2012 were reduced thanks to a slowdown in the rate of deforestation in the Amazon. Nevertheless, environmental groups claim that in 2013 emissions jumped by about 8% due to deforestation rising again (see BRAZIL: Sustainable energy faces rising obstacles - September 22, 2014)

Mexico.

The tenth-largest emitter has pledged to reduce emissions by 30% below 'business as usual' by 2020, conditional on international support. This became law in 2012, including a target for 2050, but Mexico's opening of its energy sector will make it harder to reach its targets. Nevertheless, its plans to provide 33% of its energy from renewable sources by 2018 should help to reduce energy consumption from fossil fuels, which currently represents more than 80%.

Chile.

Santiago has a target for a 20% cut by 2020 from 2007 levels, and Chile was the first South American country to introduce a carbon tax last year. Despite an increase in investments in renewables, its 2020 target will still be hard to achieve because of its almost total dependency on oil imports.

Costa Rica.

San Jose has made a commitment to become carbon-neutral by 2021, conditional on external support. An upgrade to an oil refinery on its east coast -- currently being negotiated with China -- could undermine its neutrality goal.

Regional cooperation .

The establishment of INDCs may provide a useful way of increasing cooperation, as countries in the region share similarities. Central American and Caribbean nations are particularly vulnerable to climate-driven emergencies (see CENTRAL AMERICA: Disaster management is key challenge - December 31, 2014). Andean nations, for their part, are under a medium to long-term threat from glacial melt, while across the region many coastal cities are exposed to sea level rises (see LATIN AMERICA: Sea level rise adds pressure on cities - October 24, 2013).

Two important regional initiatives were announced during the Lima conference:

Eight countries (Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador, Chile and Costa Rica) announced reforestation plans of up to 20 million hectares by 2020.

Four countries (Peru, Colombia, Mexico and Panama) pledged funds to the Green Climate Fund, the financial mechanism of the UNFCCC.

Brazil and Chile have promoted regional dialogue, but differences regarding climate change policies and negotiations between alliances of different political leanings remain strong. At Lima, these differences were again in evidence in negotiations over the text and their attitudes towards carbon markets and the need for finance from richer countries.

Roadblocks.

Implementation of countries' commitments could lead to significant changes in their economies, particularly in carbon-intensive sectors such as energy, transport, waste disposal and agriculture.

However, most Latin American governments will be reluctant to implement serious emission-cutting policies which they think could threaten growth or have high costs. The Lima accord included no commitments to new funds from richer nations to help less-developed countries in their adaptation policies, and it is not required to include this assistance in the new commitment plans.

One way forward is presented by the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, which maintains that climate measures do not need to threaten growth. Its 'Better Growth, Better Climate' report provides detailed examples of urban policies built around mass public transport, which can arguably create cities which are economically dynamic, healthier and have lower emissions. It is particularly relevant to Latin America, which is 80% urbanised.

Outlook.

Negotiations on a preliminary text for the Paris conference will take place in five sessions throughout 2015, starting in February. All countries are expected to publish their plans to cut emissions before June. The different attitudes towards these goals by countries in the region will again be salient in the process.

In November, the UN will produce a report analysing these targets. The report will focus on whether they are, in total, sufficient to keep the global temperature increase to below 2 degrees Celsius by the end of this century.

The Paris agreement, if successful, will commit all countries to cutting emissions. However, it will not take effect until 2020.

CONCLUSION: Any Paris deal to cut emissions is likely to be based on peer pressure, and not on legal enforcement. Moreover, countries' plans are not subject to third-party assessment. The most likely scenario is that some Latin American countries -- Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Costa Rica in particular -- will take any further international commitments seriously, even though they will find it difficult to meet targets. Other countries, such as Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, are unlikely to take action unless much more aid is forthcoming.

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Subject	Economic conditions; International relations; Foreign aid; Environmental policy; International law; Public policy; Summit conferences; Negotiations; Politics; Social conditions & trends; Energy policy; Government; Economic growth; Legislation; Disasters; Pollution; Reforms; Regulation; Climate change
Location	Latin America, Caribbean area, China
Classification	9173: Latin America 1540: Pollution control
Identifier / keyword	Latin America, Caribbean area, China, Economic conditions, International relations, Foreign aid, Environment, International law, Public policy, Summit conferences, Negotiations, Politics,

Social conditions & trends, Energy policy, Government, Economic growth, Legislation, Disasters, Pollution, Reforms, Regulation

Title	LATIN AMERICA: Climate change progress requires aid
Publication title	OxResearch Daily Brief Service
Pages	n/a
Publication year	2015
Publication date	Jan 20, 2015
Year	2015
Publisher	Oxford Analytica Ltd
Place of publication	Oxford
Country of publication	United Kingdom
Publication subject	Business And Economics
Source type	Reports
Language of publication	English
Document type	News
ProQuest document ID	1646739731
Document URL	http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1646739731?accountid=12702
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Last updated	2015-02-24
Database	ProQuest Central