

Action on Implementation of Copenhagen Accord Most Critical for Canada

An IISD Commentary

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The successful implementation of the Copenhagen Accord on climate change is arguably more critical for Canada than for any other country, offering an opportunity to shift the focus from Canada not meeting its Kyoto target to Canada playing a proactive role as a constructive contributor to the Accord.

The Canadian government has started to take steps in the right direction. Recent announcements by the government include contributions to fast-start financing under the Copenhagen Green Fund, implementation of fuel-efficiency standards and the regulation of coal-fired electricity generation. But there is still work to be done.

Canada needs to demonstrate a willingness and ability to reduce emissions before insisting that developing countries take on similar commitments. Greenhouse gases are cumulative and developed countries are historically responsible for three quarters of such gases in the atmosphere, and developed countries have significantly higher incomes and emissions on a per-person basis. Data from the International Energy Agency show that Canada's per capita carbon dioxide emissions in 2007 of 17.32 tonnes were fourth among developed countries, and significantly higher than the average developing country emissions of 2.58 tonnes per citizen.

Looking beyond a narrow environment approach to a broader foreign policy approach reveals a range of opportunities for Canada to contribute to the Copenhagen Accord. Climate change discussions do not occur in isolation from other developments on the global agenda, and many decisions critical for an effective transition to a low-carbon economy will take place outside the climate community. Acting on these opportunities in a coordinated and coherent manner can help Canada strengthen its reputation on climate change with positive implications for its profile internationally.

While Canada's response is likely to be closely linked to that of the United States, there are steps that Canada can and should take to address climate change. On the international trade and investment file, incentives for low-carbon investment are needed, such as action on fossil fuel subsidy reform. When providing fast-start financing, Canada can begin to regain Canadian leadership on incorporating climate change into development programming by building on previous climate change work in developing countries and increasing support for adaptation projects. Adaptation programming will help poor countries adjust to a range of development challenges, including those that arise as a result of climate change. In programming the fast-start financing, opportunities for bilateral "signature" projects that can be identified with Canada and led by Canadians should not be overlooked.

Canada needs to continue to build a credible and comprehensive plan that lays out how it intends to meet its target of a 17 per cent emissions reduction below 2005 levels by 2020. This plan needs to address all greenhouse gas emissions—from both production and consumption—if Canada is to increase its leverage in the climate negotiations.

Building this plan can be supported by a strong dialogue on a national energy and climate change strategy—one that includes federal, provincial and territorial governments at the core, but also key stakeholders across the country representing municipalities, business, non-governmental organizations, labour, consumers and indigenous groups. Once Canada determines what it wants by way of a climate and energy regulatory regime—that is, what is in the Canadian interest—it can work to make sure that this plan complements actions and legislation in the United States.

An informed domestic constituency can help the government determine how it can relate to and work with the United States, identify actions for Canada that do not carry strong competitiveness implications, enhance Canada's international profile on this issue and implement effective overseas green investments to help put the planet on the path to low-carbon development. A new approach needs to be launched that is dead serious about Canada's climate change obligations, but also aware enough to acknowledge that such a transformation can be achieved only through a strong consensual base.

John Drexhage and Deborah Murphy are co-authors of *Climate Change and Foreign Policy in Canada: Intersection and Influence*—a Canadian International Council report issued this week.