

Global Challenges

/ [Global Challenges](#) / Window of Opportunity Narrowing for Low-carbon Economy



Window of Opportunity Narrowing for Low-carbon Economy

The world watched as climate change talks took place in Bonn earlier this month. It will await outcomes of August, September and November meetings leading to Copenhagen in December to see what global leaders bring to the table to help avoid the "disaster" of a no-decision about how to move forward with needed climate change action items.

With the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen less than 180 days away at the time this article was published (June 2009), climate change talks continue to be the top priority for many government leaders as they attend the last few big meetings leading up to the convention.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) operates with the goal in mind that "change is inevitable, but pace and intensity must be managed so that people and ecosystems can adapt," and developed countries must take the lead.

With countries in Asia and Europe using a variety of emission reduction methods, including carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) from coal plants and energy generated from nuclear plants, it is not easy to discern the "best bet." But the European Union has had some positive reactions to its tactics.

"European Union [EU] emissions of climate-changing greenhouse gases [GHG] declined for the third consecutive year in 2007," according to the EU's GHG inventory report compiled by the European Environment Agency.

"The EU-27's overall domestic emissions were 9.3% below 1990 levels, which equaled a drop of 1.2% or 59 million tonnes of CO₂ [carbon dioxide] equivalent compared to 2006. The EU-15 now stands 5% below its Kyoto Protocol base-year levels," according to a [May 29, 2009, Web-base article](#).



A group of journalists representing eight countries spent the first week of May in Germany visiting with government dignitaries and officials in Berlin and Bonn learning about public policy, climate change, emissions reductions efforts, technology advancements and more.

Germany officials during the trip said the country's residents won't sign off on nuclear energy because of the waste factor (where to store it; how to store it; "not too close to me," [some said](#)), so the country is phasing out its nuclear plants by 2020, against the judgment of some.

"Turning back from the plan to phase-out nuclear energy makes ecological and economic sense, and we recommend it," the scientist group Political Energy Program wrote in a mid-2008 edition of Der Tagesspiegel newspaper, according to an excerpt from the Web site.

While nuclear is one of the most vital sources of energy for India, at least one new coal plant is being erected weekly in China.

According to the [World Nuclear Association](#) "India expects 20,000 Mwe nuclear capacity online by 2020 and 63,000 MWe by 2032, and aims to supply 25% of electricity from nuclear power by 2050."

The article goes on to note that nuclear power supplied 15.8 billion kWh (2.5%) of India's electricity in 2007 from 3.7 GWe (of 110 GWe total) capacity, which is set to increase steadily as imported uranium becomes available and new plants come on line. India's shortage of fossil fuels is driving the nuclear investment for electricity, and 25% nuclear contribution is foreseen by 2050, from 100 times the 2002 capacity.

So with the various views on the most effective energy sources, what is the UNFCCC to do come Copenhagen? What is the best route for these countries to take? Who is "right" and how does the organization recommend uniting with these differing views?

"I can tell you the thinking of the executive secretary – not necessarily the board – and he is very much in favor of throwing everything you've got at climate change," said John Hay, UNFCCC information officer, during the journalists' question and answer session at the Bonn office after a presentation.

"So certainly using nuclear, renewables, using CCS – some technologies will take some time to actually hit the market, and CCS is one example of that, but again, coal is so cheap and so abundant, CCS will certainly have to be a large part of the equation. Countries simply are investing in nuclear, that's a reality. Whether you like it or not, it's certainly going to happen, but it needs to be scaled up," Hay said.

"From the projections that I've seen, I think nuclear will remain at about 5%, then of course, overall energy needs are skyrocketing, so this means simply a scaling up of nuclear, but not actually in terms of percentage.

"And then, of course, renewables are key. I mean, ultimately, by the end of the century, the world economy has to be based to a large possible extent on renewables, and if not then ... it's the general recognition," he said.

A journalist for Vietnam asked what would happen if the group in Copenhagen fails to make a decision about what to do to move forward with climate change actions.

"Well, it'd be a disaster," Hay said. "It'd be an absolute total unmitigated disaster. There's really a narrow window of opportunity now. We need a new agreement to enter into force post-2012. Governments need time to ratify whatever is agreed, so if this is put off say by another year that

will narrow again the window of opportunity to actually act of about 10 years now to shift toward low-carbon economy. If we miss that, it would really be something.”

However, Hay assured the group he and the UNFCCC, along with global leaders, are confident further positive actions will come out of Copenhagen.

“Governments are committed, and the essential thing is that an agreement is reached on these four areas where we feel that clarity is required,” Hay said. “Not all the details have to be worked out in Copenhagen – of course there will be successor meetings, there will be follow-up meetings – but the targets have to be nailed down, and if they’re not nailed down, when will they be nailed down?”

The four areas of clarity Hay referenced are what the UNFCCC has outlined as the four political essentials to be resolved to make Copenhagen work:

1. clarity on targets for industrialized countries;
2. clarity on nationally appropriate mitigation actions of developing countries;
3. clarity on how to generate support for mitigation and adaptation in developing countries; and
4. clarity on the governance structures to manage the generated support.

When one journalist from a media company in Washington, D.C., asked how much the success of the targets set in Copenhagen are based upon the goals countries actually bring to the meeting – noting the United States just introduced legislation and is starting negotiations, Hay had this to say: “The U.S. has stated its target – it’s returning to 1990 emissions levels by 2020, so it has stated a -16% or -17% target. Perhaps what you’re also asking is does national legislation have to be in place, and we think not. It would be better. It would be ideal if legislation had been passed, but it’s not essential. The essential thing is that there is a good target, and an agreement on how finance will be generated for mechanisms and things like that.”

Hay called 2007 the “big bang,” the year negotiations were launched to respond to the momentum of climate change – the Bali Roadmap.

A number of action items came out of the Bali, Indonesia, meeting in 2007 with an end goal being an agreed outcome in Copenhagen. Conference negotiations – focusing on the four building blocks of adaptation, mitigation, technology and finance – were established with the goal to strengthen international response up to and beyond 2012.

Ongoing work in technology and adaptation, for example, as well as Kyoto Protocol negotiations were cited as a priority.

Referencing Hay’s “big bang” comment, Thomas Schueneman with Global Warming is Real.com, noted the pace at which technology has changed since then, asking, “how is that affecting things?”

“It is affecting the process as much as it’s lending the process a sense of added urgency, and I think the message is heard loud and clear by a lot of policymakers that things are actually worse than we thought two years ago,” Hay said. “On the other hand, in terms of political decision-making, the fourth assessment [clarity on the governance structures] does remain the benchmark. The main findings of the fourth assessment still remain valid with regard to what is needed for emissions reduction. Scientists are not going back and saying the fourth assessment is invalid, they are saying that you could actually rewrite some aspects of it because climate change is speeding up.

“But it doesn’t actually change the political fundamentals of what was recognized in 2007, it doesn’t change the fundamentals of what the scenarios are – so both the impact scenarios and mitigation scenarios are essentially the same.”

Next Steps In the Climate Change Process

- Bonn Climate Change Talks—Aug. 10-14
- Bangkok Climate Change Talks—Sept. 28-Oct. 9
- Spain Climate Change Talks—Nov. 2-6
- Conference of the Parties 15/UN Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen—Dec. 7-18

[BACK](#)



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