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A coal in mind

Why the climate conference COP24 in Katowice is an important milestone for achieving the 1.5°C target

Read this article in German.

Almost three years after the historic Paris Climate Agreement was drafted, the world is once again at a crossroads. From 2 to 14 December 2018, members of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will meet in Katowice, Poland, to decide on concrete steps to implement the World Climate Treaty at the 24th Conference of Parties (COP24).

The Heads of State and Government also have to deal with a number of highly complex issues this time around. The publication of the special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has increased pressure to act if the world wants to stay within the 1.5°C target. While the messages the report contains are not new, it does reaffirm our pivotal situation – in all its urgency and backed up with strong scientific evidence.

Humanity has two options. Either we will do our utmost to limit global warming to a maximum of 1.5°C, which would preserve the ecosystems and livelihoods of millions of people worldwide.

Or we do little or nothing. That would put the planet on track for 3 to 4°C of warming or worse, and entail devastating effects beyond our control, such as more frequent extreme weather events like floods and droughts. These catastrophes will not only cost people their lives and cause destruction, but they will also hold back development and incite conflicts.

COP24 is not the only step in achieving the 1.5°C goal and its benefits for humanity and nature. But its results will likely provide a decisive impetus. The Katowice conference will determine whether we will succeed in bringing the energy and transport sector, agriculture and industry onto the path of low-carbon development. It will determine if we can win humanity's most crucial race for the preservation of our

planet.

The COP24 conflict lines

In order for this conference to be a success, two factors are particularly critical. The first, of course, concerns the technical groundwork. That may sound boring, but is an essential step to being able to implement the Paris Climate Agreement at all. The work program of COP24 includes the drafting and adoption of a balanced and robust set of rules, for example on transparency and reporting. The present version is still far too long. Moreover, developing countries in particular are experiencing a lack of balance when it comes to the issues to be addressed. That could weaken and prolong the entire process.

Secondly, the official adoption of the implementing guidelines ('Paris Rulebook') in Katowice is extremely important because it's the only way that the World Climate Agreement can be effective from 2020. Only then is it possible to achieve the 1.5°C target.

As with previous climate conferences, climate financing will also be on the political agenda and may even tip the scales here and there. On the one hand, concrete financial commitments by the industrialised countries are needed, for example on how to replenish the Green Climate Funds and how to meet the financing target of USD 100bn annually from 2020 onwards.

On the other hand, one of the central conflicts will be sparked off: the issue of whether the amount and output target of the industrialised countries' financing commitments will be announced in advance. For many developing countries, this is an important point in order to increase predictability and accountability. Financing issues at the climate conferences are always associated with confidence and solidarity. If these negotiations fail, successes in other areas are also placed in jeopardy.

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COP24 also drives the urgent announcements to increase the ambition of National Climate Change Contributions (NDCs). The current commitments of the nations bring us to a projected warming of 3 to 4°C, accompanied by the well-known catastrophic consequences for humans and nature.

At this point, it remains to be seen whether nations are taking the IPCC report and the 1.5°C target seriously. Only if the countries show ambition to increase their own emission reduction targets, then we can

still act in good time and prevent the worst. A number of instruments, such as the Talanoa Dialogue, are well suited to increasing ambitions.

The question of whether they will succeed, however, must be seen in the context of the negotiating skills and priorities of the Polish Presidency of the COP24. The latter focuses primarily on three ways of structural change, i.e. just transition, electromobility, and climate neutrality by means of forest growth. Before the conference, the Polish Presidency emphasised its desire to concentrate on adopting the Rulebook. That's not bad per se. However, it could mean that there is no longer enough diplomatic space for the urgent need to raise ambitions. For the Polish presidency, this has not really been on the political agenda so far.

In addition to the important adoption of a robust set of rules, reliable commitments in the field of climate finance and an increase in the level of ambition, something else is required for both COP 24 and the efforts in the months thereafter to become a climate policy success: courage and political will.

Germany's role as a climate leader

In Germany, the 'Growth, Structural Change and Employment' Commission, which currently prepares a roadmap for the phase-out of coal, carries many hopes both nationally and internationally. But the publication of results for planning a socially responsible exit from coal was postponed to January or February 2019, at the intervention of one group of players. Originally, the release was scheduled for December, just in time for the UN Climate Change Conference.

From an international point of view, these delays send a problematic signal to the world. Other nations do watch Germany very closely. If such a strong and stable economic nation fails to get out of coal quickly and in a socially responsible manner, this could have a negative impact and cause other countries to wait and see. For the world climate that would be fatal.

The German delegation still enjoys considerable prestige within the UNFCCC. Until now, it has been a successful bridge-builder and progressive actor in advancing the preparation and implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. The current events are putting pressure on them and only time will tell how the international community will react. Unfortunately, it seems that in many places in the world, countries have not yet reached the conclusion that effective and ambitious climate protection is the better alternative for the greater part of humanity – not only in the Global South but also in Germany. Clean air, sustainable and low-carbon mobility concepts, food from sustainable sources and good

jobs in the renewable energy sector benefit everyone, the economy as well.

The recent IPCC report has clearly shown that the chief barriers to achieving the 1.5°C target do not lie in the scientific area. Overcoming these hurdles depends solely on political will. Today we have the opportunity to reduce emissions without jeopardising our prosperity. At the same time, given the challenges, there is still too little happening because a small group is benefiting from the status quo. Only a scant few years remain to turn the tide. The EU however did take an important step in the right direction with its long-term climate change strategy, published on 28 November in the run-up to COP24: in two out of the eight scenarios developed, the EU achieves carbon neutrality by 2050. This shows political will to make a change and shape the future.



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