

ScienceTalk

Beyond pledges, transparency also important to ensure progress tracked



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It has been two years since the last United Nations climate change conference in Spain, and nations have been using the time to prepare for the full implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement.

The next meeting, 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26), will kick off on Sunday in Glasgow, Scotland, and the hope is that the details of the “Paris Rulebook” – a guide for nations on how to take climate action agreed on at COP24 in Poland – will be finalised then.

COP26 will be crucial for South-east Asia, a region that contributes to and is affected by climate change.

Even after accounting for the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the region’s gross domestic product is still projected to nearly triple by 2040. Fuelling that growth will require significant amounts of energy – and emis-

sions if generated with fossil fuels.

The region is also home to more than 640 million people, many of whom live along coastlines vulnerable to flooding and tropical storms.

With climate impacts worsening with every degree of warming, scientists have warned that warming must be kept to 1.5 deg C above pre-industrial levels to avert the harshest impacts of climate change.

Under the Paris Agreement, nations must take progressive action to reduce their carbon footprint so the world has a greater chance of limiting warming to the 1.5 deg C threshold.

CLIMATE COMMITMENTS

South-east Asia has not wasted time debating whether or not climate change is happening or what to do about it.

In the past two years, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar submitted updated climate pledges – called nationally determined contributions (NDCs) – while Brunei and the Philippines submitted their first NDCs.

For its part, Singapore has committed to having its emissions peak at 65 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (MtCO₂e) in 2030.

The country also communicated a long-term strategy to halve its emissions to 33 MtCO₂e by 2050, with a view to achieving net-zero by the second half of the century once technology becomes viable.

Its closest neighbours have also announced plans to reach carbon-neutrality: Malaysia said it will do so by 2050, Indonesia by 2060 and Thailand by 2070.

Overall, the NDCs from South-east Asian countries are clearer and have greater sectoral coverage than before – going beyond emissions reduction from burning of fossil fuels to include sectors such as forestry and waste management.

Most NDCs also contain clear numerical targets as well as descriptions of strategies, plans and actions.

In the past five years, countries have developed and issued several important policies on climate change response at the national level.

They have also started to internalise the new guidance from the Paris Rulebook – by enhancing their new NDCs or expanding their scopes and coverage, and showing how the new pledges go above what they previously said they would do.

With South-east Asia home to the world’s third-largest rainforest basin, the preservation of forests and other natural habitats also featured strongly in some Asean countries’ climate pledges, such as Cambodia and Brunei.

Other countries have said they can do more – provided they receive more help. Vietnam, for instance, pledged to reduce its emissions by a greater amount if it receives international support.

THE NEED FOR TRANSPARENCY

Countries have different NDCs because of their relative economic,

geographic diversity and energy security standing.

This must also be taken into account when assessing their NDCs and policy progress.

But even as countries are urged to make bolder climate pledges, NDCs and net-zero targets are not the only markers of commitment to the Paris Agreement.

Another key issue is how transparent countries are in reporting their progress to achieve these targets, allowing their progress to be tracked.

Participation in the transparency process helps build capacity within governments to collect and handle emissions data, so a transparency report can be produced in a timely manner. A lack of capacity for doing this is also at times used as a bargaining tool for more support.

Over the past two decades, the arrangements for national reporting under the transparency mechanism of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the parent convention of the Paris Agreement – have evolved into a more compre-

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hensive framework for measurement, reporting and verification.

Currently, the reporting requirements and the timetable for the submission of national reports are different for developed and developing countries.

But this is set to change by 2024, when all countries have to adhere to a single set of modalities, procedures and guidelines under the enhanced transparency framework of the Paris Agreement.

While all countries have to submit transparency reports, least developed countries and small island developing states can submit at their own discretion.

Submitting these reports and participating in multilateral sharing workshops will put most Asean countries in a good position to transition to the enhanced transparency framework.

Moving from the current measurement, reporting and verification system, which requires only a few key elements, to the enhanced transparency framework has its challenges.

Other than just reporting the amount of emissions produced and ways to reduce this, countries under the new framework also need to report on how they are impacted by climate change and how they plan to adapt.

They will also need to provide details on the support received and how this help is used. Where they deviate from the single set of guidelines, they need to explain why they should be afforded the flexibility.

A single set of guidelines could allow for greenhouse gas inventories to be aligned with international benchmarks for data quality.

Developing Asean countries will need help moving to the enhanced transparency regime.

This includes adequate support and training to help countries implement electronic reporting of in-

formation necessary to track progress in achieving NDCs.

The negotiations at these UN climate change conferences are a political forum through which all countries may openly communicate their interests and challenges.

Since all NDCs are self-determined, the biggest challenge for negotiators from the various countries is to accommodate different types of NDCs while providing the necessary flexibility to developing countries so as to ensure a global consensus can be reached.

This must be done while ensuring that the scope of information required under the new guidelines are met.

While flexibility is provided for developing countries, the first report due in 2024 will require a huge leap in institutional capabilities from now till then.

In this respect, the UNFCCC and COP26 should commit funds to organise more training and sharing sessions to help countries prepare for the 2024 submission and beyond.

Any delays in the finalisation of transparency reporting tables in Glasgow could affect countries’ preparation for new NDCs and reporting in the coming years.

On the road to Glasgow, negotiators from South-east Asia will be looking for more opportunities to reflect further on issues – including transparency requirements – and advance understanding of technical and political considerations, and build momentum towards agreement.

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