

How committed are we?

Why the Copenhagen Treaty should keep the current five-year commitment periods

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The Kyoto Protocol is based on commitment periods instead of single target years. The first five-year commitment period is 2008-12. In the lead-up to the Copenhagen Climate Summit, countries are negotiating the second commitment period, which starts in 2013 and should run until 2017.

However, some countries are now discussing the idea of extending the length of those commitment periods including, for example, one commitment period from 2013-2020.

While no real rationale for an extension is being offered, there are a number of very strong reasons why the commitment periods should be kept the same.

Targets and actions must be adjusted to reflect the latest science

The IPCC 5th assessment report (AR5) will be published in 2013 and 2014 and is very likely to paint an even more alarming and urgent picture of the climate crisis and leading to calls for greater emissions reductions.

The current five year commitment periods mean that publication of the AR5 will coincide with the start of negotiations for the next commitment period (2018-2022), allowing for adjustment of the targets and actions of all countries accordingly. For example, eight-year commitment periods would mean it would take a further six years before countries could act on the new science in the AR5.

Decisions on action could be delayed to future governments,

Election periods are typically four to six years. Commitment periods of longer than five years could cause political responsibility to fall between election cycles.

A five year commitment period would help to bridge the financial and economic crisis, which can effect the Copenhagen agreement on financing. Industrialised countries can be expected to agree on bigger financing numbers if the time-horizon is shorter. With the help of the IPCC's AR5, which is expected to go into more detail on the costs of mitigation as well as costs of inaction, the targets and financial support developing countries can be adjusted again for the next commitment period.

Longer commitment period – lower reductions by 2020

If 2020 goals were grouped into just one commitment period, it is likely that the overall reduction targets would be lower - for two reasons:

1) In the 2nd commitment period (2013-2017), only a few developing countries (newly industrialised) could be expected to take on binding, economy-wide or sectoral emissions caps. However, by the 3rd commitment period (2018-2022), more countries are likely to reach a higher level of economic development and will have a greater capacity to act. If by then industrialised countries have built trust and shown leadership by delivering on their emission reduction targets and support obligations, we can expect new countries to take on targets. Agreeing on a single commitment period up to 2020 now would mean that rapidly industrialising countries would not be taking on any binding emissions limitation commitments until after 2020.

2) As developing countries are likely to take only voluntary actions in the next commitment period, this could provide some developed countries with the excuse to take on less ambitious 2020 reduction targets, while they wait for their developing country competitors to come on board.

The resulting actions from both industrialised and developing countries up to 2020 would not deliver the deep cuts needed to avoid catastrophic climate change.

Room for the US to upgrade

Having five-year commitment periods would also leave room for the US to upgrade its target for the 3rd commitment period (2018-2022), instead of setting a weak target for 2020 now. The Waxman bill includes the principle of adequacy reviews (in the light of recent science) every four years, so if and when their first review indicated that their cap for 2020 was not adequate to deliver what the science requires, they could upgrade their 2020 target. The question remains: does the US *want* to upgrade its position in the third commitment period?

“But what about investor confidence”

A typical argument in favor of longer commitment periods is investor confidence. Having longer commitment periods would bring certainty for investments with long pay back times. Consider that this “certainty” argument is one being run by big coal companies like E-On, Peabody Coal and Vattenfall, who want certainty to continue building coal-fired power plants - the most polluting energy source on the planet.

However, investor confidence can be built in to the five-year commitment periods through better means: long term action plans for both industrialised countries and advanced developing countries; financing commitments for industrialised countries and a default setting in the industrialised country targets. The Copenhagen deal could agree a default setting where – if negotiations for the subsequent commitment period didn’t conclude in time (2015) – an x % annual decrease in the QELROs (or QERCs – *quantified emissions reduction commitments*) would be applied for developed country targets, to be in-line with the pathway towards longer term goals.

The percentage for annual reductions would be in line with meeting the aggregate developed country target for 2020 (the mid point for the 3rd commitment period). Also an x % decrease in growth limitation of developing country emissions as a group could be introduced.