

Global Letter Global GHG reduction – an uncoordinated muddle and mess



The go-it-alone policies of major emitters are being revealed as collectively unfeasible.

COP26 in November faces an impossibly wide spread of national interests to corral into a unified global programme. It has been set up for failure by the clash between ambition and reality on climate change – with three elements in particular undermining the whole carbon-zero target:

1. Governments do not really understand the workings of the energy market (as the predictable, and predicted, current gas shortages and surges in imports of thermal coal illustrate).
2. The climate change movement's (and the International Energy Agency's) call for comprehensive disinvestment from fossil fuel projects takes insufficient account of the full energy-supply implications of their demands.
3. Carbon reduction and poverty alleviation are in direct conflict, unless policies are explicitly implemented to deal with both. For nearly all governments, the latter is a higher priority.

Renewable energy sources will take several decades to make up for the c.80% of global energy use currently provided by fossil fuels. Meanwhile, the depleted availability of oil and gas risks severely constricting energy supply for most countries, especially emerging economies. This will inhibit economic development and constrain poverty alleviation efforts.

Already, disinvestment from natural gas development is creating gas scarcity and encouraging coal and/or raw biomass use to fill the gap. The upshot is that emissions are rising. What is needed for measurable progress in this decade, and where COP26 could in principle most usefully focus its attention, is a step-by-step process to accelerate a programme along the following lines:

- The replacement of coal-fired electricity generation with renewables where available, and with gas where not.
- A massive increase of electricity provision in the poorest countries, fuelled in the short term mainly by gas, in order to replace charcoal burning and other biomass use.
- Rapid and concentrated investment in each country in the renewable that best suits the geography, backed up by gas. Renewable capacity is not the same as renewable availability, and gas is the cheapest-cleanest source of back-up power when sun or wind fails. The cost of this essential support system has not been factored into the true investment expense of renewables. If gas is scarce, most countries will turn – as they are doing – to coal for back-up.
- Sharp pressure on fossil fuel producers to clean up their act, especially on gas flaring and methane leakage, but stopping short of total disinvestment.
- Continued research and development of carbon-capture technologies, given that it will take more than a decade to produce affordable large-scale systems that make any difference.
- Carbon offset programmes, such as massive reforestation and energy efficiency drives. Accelerating a market for carbon itself, or creating a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, will not solve the problem of reducing carbon emissions without high damage to economies.

Shouting for governments to end fossil fuel use immediately delays the moment when governments act collectively to implement achievable change. Societal demands for a 'just transition' create political pressure for governments to limit economic fallout from climate policies. And yet nothing seen so far shows that governments, or the UN system, or the American climate czar, John Kerry, see COP26 as the moment to build the bridge between ambition and reality. Without this they risk delaying the accumulative steps required to deliver 2050 net-zero.

Watch for

While we doubt it, perhaps someone (but it does not look likely to be the Americans) may spring a surprise at COP26. So watch for

- Any sign of a proposal to coordinate the transition, fuel by fuel, coherently at world level.
- A strong push from the emerging economies for help to move them on from coal and biomass.
- A collective attempt to set achievable, rather than rhetorical, targets over the next 5-10 years, rather than over decades. ■

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