

AUDACIOUS IDEAS AND ACTIONS FOR A ZERO CARBON WORLD



Policy-makers, academics, business and civil society leaders gathered in London this week for the fifth annual Chatham House Climate Change Conference. In the hallways and audience chamber and on the podium, the mood was one of ambition – even audacity – around the possibilities for moving swiftly towards a zero net carbon world. As one commentator noted, ‘leaders smell success’ around the transition to greener economies. They smell competitive advantage and resource efficiencies with near-term as well as long-term benefits. The mood was bullish even as participants acknowledged the power plays among interest groups as the shift to a low carbon economy takes place.

Participants heard how the “game has changed” in terms of renewable energy technologies in the past five years. The production costs of these technologies have plummeted, their affordability and scale of use have multiplied. Few analysts had predicted this speed or scale of change. The New Climate Economy report says that adopting green technologies and practices is not only the smart thing to do but the cost-competitive thing to do. This new body of work has brought new impetus to the sense that the game is changing.

In the past five years, too, scientific understanding of climate change impacts and the contribution of human activity to climate change has advanced. Now it’s even possible to take an individual extreme event and show how much more likely it is to have happened as a result of man-made climate change.

Has it become easier to take policy decisions that reduce climate-related risks? The IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report presents a risk reduction and management approach to dealing with climate impacts and vulnerabilities; it also presents a panoply of policy options and costings for climate change mitigation; but the job still isn’t straightforward.

Testimony from South Africa shed a poignant light on the interconnections between fossil fuel interests and social welfare in that country – connections that are difficult to pry apart. The largest contributors to South Africa’s tax revenue coffers are fossil fuel-based power utilities and mining companies with high greenhouse gas emissions, said a speaker who cannot be named under the ‘Chatham House rule’; those same tax revenues are funding crucial social investment

programmes in the post-apartheid era. 'Black empowerment' is a pillar of the South African government's social development policy. Many of the beneficiaries have made their money in the coal industry.

Conference participants also discussed the geopolitical rivalries and rampant commercial interests that are driving exploration for oil and gas in the Arctic regions – fossil fuel reserves which, if extracted, will compound climate change. If restraint and wise governance of these resources seems challenging, how much more challenging is it for South Africa, where a wholesale restructuring of a country's energy economy is needed?

Big ideas for moving forward

Against this discussion on 'stock-taking' about our state of knowledge three major themes developed on the way forward. These can roughly be described as: take a precautionary reading of the latest climate science; form 'out of the box' partnerships; and move audaciously to transform professional practices.

Take a precautionary reading of the latest climate science: The IPCC's Fifth Assessment – of which the Synthesis Report was launched last Sunday – caused hot debate in the hallways of the conference. The IPCC's process is based on consensus; unsurprisingly, this leads to conservative conclusions. Governments must agree on the final Summary for Policy Makers; the thousands of pages-long assessment is the product of consensus among more than 800 leading climate scientists. The Synthesis Report concludes that for it to be 'more likely than not' to keep global temperature rise at or below 2 degrees Celsius, then the global economy must be approaching net zero carbon emissions by 2100. The definition of 'more likely than not' is given as 66% likelihood. The science is robust- but commentators found the headline highly controversial. As one put it: "if you are in a small island state that's going under water already, then being told that there is a one third chance of greater than 2 degrees temperature rise is simply not good enough." Many individual, scientists, politicians think one third likelihood of going over 2 degrees is too great a risk – to reduce the likelihood, the global economy should move far more swiftly towards net zero carbon.

Partnerships for ambitious climate action: Minister Manuel Pulgar Vidal, President of COP20, has taken a broad and encompassing view of who should be at the table to influence debate around climate commitments and actions. Speaking on the record, he said:

"Lima has the ambition to be the place that gives a new input to this process," he said. "We are working more closely with different actors: business, civil society, indigenous people." Mr Pulgar-Vidal said that the civil society climate march and range of non-governmental, business and multilateral initiatives announced and debated at the UN Secretary General's Climate Summit in New York last month "left us [in a] good mood, with confidence, and recognition of different actors."

Could the elevation of civil society and indigenous people's voices and concerns in this debate signal an important power shift and allow new sources of knowledge and experience to become influential? This is one to watch as the 20th Conference of the Parties gets underway.

Move audaciously to transform professional practices: one of the most striking sessions of the conference focused on the swift progress to cap greenhouse gas emissions, via targets and practices in the building sector. Urban environments emit 75% of global greenhouse emissions. By 2030, over 80 billion square metres of new and rebuilt buildings will be constructed in cities

worldwide – a huge opportunity for limiting or reducing emissions. Two countries alone, the United States and China, will be responsible for 53% of new floor space in next 15-20 years.

The Urban Climate Initiative is working on transforming building energy codes and with increasing buy-in from cities and states in the USA. Common commitment is forged in reducing energy use over a distinct time frame; by 2016, 55% energy reduction; by 2025, 85% energy reduction; by 2030 – zero net energy-using. The framework is creating incentives for architects, builders, and developers to fast track their work, and get buildings on the ground before the code reaches its next level of stringency. “We are building the world we want!” is the rallying cry for this extensive professional community.

Although many optimistic currents ran through the meeting, participants also discussed the animosity of economic ‘losers’ from low-carbon policies and technologies. The long version of the IPCC’s Synthesis Report outlines how in the range of 3670 – 7100 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (CO₂e) is in identified fossil fuel reserves* and yet only 1000 tonnes may be exploited if the world is to stay within 2 degree limits. Rising to this challenge means that companies in the fossil fuel extraction industry are going to have to change their business models fast to survive; the phrase ‘stranded assets’ cropped up often in the debate.

Ultimately, the Paris climate change conference in December 2015 will be a ‘political forcing point’, as one speaker put it. Here, the world’s leaders must gather to lock in the framework for ambitious action, and ensure that business activities, consumer choices and investment plans are aligned to assure a safe climate and resilient future for all.

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