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Climate change: A step backwards and forwards

By Ned Helme

The decision reached earlier this month in Lima, Peru, at international climate negotiations is a tale of two cities.

On the one hand, the agreement reached there was historic in some ways – a wide range of nations agreed to cut back on carbon pollution.

At the same time, traditional divisions along north-south lines were still in evidence. The accord was in some ways a papered-over compromise that leaves some of the age-old battles still to be fought and decided next year in Paris at the key meeting where a new international agreement is to be finalized. Among the issues not completely solved are who exactly will take action, how ambitious will they be, and, most important, who ultimately will pay?

Still, there's cause for optimism. China, the U.S and the E.U., which together emit 60 percent of the world's carbon pollution, have pledged real emissions reductions. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is off to a good start with quick commitments to \$10 billion in initial capitalization, of which half will be distributed to adaptation and poorer countries and half through competitive bidding to the most transformational anti-air-pollution programs around the world.

The international process leading up to the meeting in Paris next year will include proposals from most countries laying out what they intend to do on their own and many are likely to also indicate where they think international partnership can enhance their ambitions. In particular, countries as diverse as Colombia, Chile, Indonesia, Ecuador and Ethiopia are leading examples of middle-income, developing

countries that enjoy broad domestic political support for their path breaking anti-air-pollution, sustainable-development strategies.

The GCF needs to fulfill its early promise by financing cutting-edge adaptation programs and transformational actions next year, the models for which already exist in many countries. Ecuador's bold plan stands to reduce fossil fuel subsidies and at the same time move the country from 50 percent fossil fuel fired electricity to 90 percent renewable energy by 2020. Colombia has an ambitious plan to stop land-filling garbage and to, instead, recycle and reuse waste productively. Ethiopia's electrification of freight rail will dramatically cut its transport emissions, thanks to its big shift to renewable energy. These examples of win-win programs – often home grown in developing countries – should be backed not by tired rhetorical demands, but by the financial incentives that the Green Climate Fund offers.

Instead of demanding unachievable financial commitments or pointing the finger at each other, the international community should use the money that is available today to fund these kinds of efforts. The significant private sector commitments from pension funds, insurance companies, and the financial community that were unveiled at UN Secretary General Ban-ki-Moon's New York conclave in September show that the private sector is ready to join in.

Lima was a step forward and, unfortunately, a step backwards as well. But it is still on the long and necessary trail to effective climate change action. Win-win solutions exist and should be embraced in the next step on this important journey.

Helme is president of the Center for Clean Air Policy.