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Governments need more specifics for global warming plans

By Ned Helme

Many major countries are announcing their targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The European Union has pledged to cut emissions 40 percent below 1990 levels by 2030. Switzerland is pledging reductions of 50 percent below the same year. The U.S. has promised to cut emissions by between 26 percent and 28 percent from 2005 levels by 2025.

Such headline pledges, though welcome, aren't enough. Governments need to offer more than grand-sounding, economy-wide proclamations. Otherwise, the world will be unable to judge how much progress we're making against dangerous manmade climate change.

First, these pledges (also known as "contributions") should be apples-to-apples so they can be easily compared. The EU and others use 1990 as their base year, the same year the Kyoto Protocol was signed. But the country where the protocol was signed, Japan, has abandoned the 1990 base year in favor of 2013, while the U.S. uses 2005. It's all too confusing.

Second, overarching goals should include sector-by-sector targets and information about how countries intend to achieve their targets. The details matter. For example, will urban communities be redesigned so people spend less time in traffic? Will waste be used as energy to produce cement? Without knowing the nuts and bolts, policymakers and experts lack the tools they need to evaluate the ambition of countries' proposals or to suggest ways to make them even bolder. Of course no one can tell the future, but even if these plans are flexible they can show how a country plans to get there.

Some countries, such as India, have plans that include both a unilateral component and another component that's conditioned on receipt of support. In these cases, greater specificity could help countries get the financing they need to get the job done. International organizations that underwrite emission-reduction programs want to see how programs fit into a country's overall journey to an

efficient, clean energy economy. One such funder, the Green Climate Fund, will be dispensing billions of dollars to transform countries' economies in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve their citizens' quality of life.

The communication of sectoral strategies also shows the business community a clear direction, which is often key to attracting private sector investment. This is a big deal, since making the private sector a partner will be vital in the fight against global warming.

Unfortunately, most countries have provided relatively little information about how they plan to reach their targets. The U.S. describes the legal framework that will allow the federal government to pass regulations to achieve its goals, but does not say where it expects the reductions to come from. The EU describes the legislative process it will go through to reach its ambitious reductions, and lists the economic sectors that will be covered by it. But its plan lacks specific sectoral policies. While some countries like Mexico make reference to existing national plans, most others are vague at best.

So far, Gabon's proposal is among the clearest and most precise. The African nation says it aims to cut emissions by at least 50 percent from what they would be in 2025 without additional efforts. It would achieve these reductions primarily through improvements in forestry and land use management. It also says it plans to cut gas flaring, increase energy efficiency and make much greater use of hydropower.

By providing this level of detail, Gabon is showing that real, ambitious action on climate is possible. If a few key countries begin to lay out their roadmaps to reduce emissions like Gabon, others may do the same. Remaining countries would be wise to embrace Gabon's example.

In UN climate negotiations, there is broad consensus that everyone must act. If countries show leadership and provide greater clarity on how they plan to achieve substantial reductions, other nations will follow.

Countries would be wise to develop specific plans that show how they will achieve their top line climate targets. For developing countries, this may mean identifying what actions they will take and finance on their own, followed by additional actions that go deeper and could be achieved with international funding. The latter will need to be translated into concrete investment strategies that they could present to the Green Climate Fund and other international climate finance sources to attract support. The world will be a better and cleaner place as a result.

Helme is the president of the Center for Clean Air Policy in Washington, D.C. He is an authority on clean air and industrial policy, and serves as an adviser to government officials.