

Action for Climate: Beyond the Zero Sum Game

ECF Annual Conference 2010

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, April 9-10

Purpose

“Action for Climate: Beyond the Zero Sum Game” will propose a strategy to overcome the current deadlock in climate policy. The strategy is based on seizing local, national, and global win-win opportunities rather than treating global climate policy as a single zero sum game, as was done in Copenhagen. It is based on the patience needed for large-scale historical developments like the end of apartheid, the end of the soviet empire – and the end of global environmental irresponsibility. Equally, the proposed strategy is inspired by the strong belief in the possibility of positive change now.

The Conference

The conference is organized by ECF, the European Climate Forum, with support from GSD, the European network on Global Systems Dynamics and Policies. It will offer a unique opportunity for a sober assessment of the current status of the climate issue – and for a joint search for promising next steps. ECF has a long record of unusually open debates involving widely diverging views, and of highly innovative studies dealing with climate change and climate policy. It has demonstrated a rare capacity to bring together climate scientists, economists and scholars from a variety of other fields with decision-makers from policy and business as well as with activists from civil society.

Through its wide range of expertise, the ability to work across specific knowledge areas and the willingness to embrace unorthodox approaches, ECF can foster a dialogue that overcomes the paralysing framing of the climate issue as one of allocating present costs in order to avoid future disaster. It is this framing that leads to a game where every party focuses on minimizing what it perceives as the cost it will have to carry. It is time for a debate that develops a more realistic frame of jointly seizing the opportunities that arise once the climate issue is accepted as a challenge for mobilizing untapped resources of inventiveness, solidarity, and collective action. The conference will launch this debate, and ECF will ensure that the debate will continue beyond the conference by means of publications, joint studies and exchanges of experiences in action.

In the coming weeks, information about the conference will be published on www.european-climate-forum.net. If you want to comment on it, you can do so on the GSDP (Global Systems Dynamics and Policy) blog, accessible from the same website (if you want to become a member of the blog, just send an e-mail to elke.henning@pik-potsdam.de).

Topics

The conference will address three main topics:

- Status overview of the climate issue
- Climate action opportunities
- Overcoming the zero sum mindset

These three main topics will be addressed in the following way:

The status overview will cover:	Opportunities to be discussed include:	The zero sum problem will be addressed by looking into:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate negotiations and policy instruments • Climate finance and business activities • New technological developments • Climate science and uncertainties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pricing carbon and sharing the resulting revenue • Targeted incentives for sustainable investment • Technology transfer and new intellectual property rights • Social learning across industrialized and developing countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The financial crisis and sustainability • Globalization and the role of Europe • The economics of climate change • Public opinion, culture, and collective will

Background

The Copenhagen climate conference of 2009 marked a turning point in the development of climate policy. The phase of growing expectations towards climate policy has given way to a phase of disappointment. And as long as short-term climate policy is seen as a zero sum game, long-term hopes will remain unfulfilled. Expectations towards climate policy – as expressed by heads of state, ministers, scientists, activists – are higher than ever: global warming shall be limited to no more than 2° Celsius, the industrialized economies shall be virtually carbon free in four decades, and developing countries shall avoid the path of fossil-fuel-based growth. At the same time, it is by no means clear how this could happen, and the idea that a legally binding and effectively implemented global contract will realize these goals in the near future appears more and more like a form of wishful thinking. The recent impression, amplified by media reports, that climate scientists sometimes overstate the reliability of particular claims about climate impacts is certainly not helpful in this situation.

Faced with these challenges, one can simply stay with the way the climate problem has been increasingly framed in the past years: if we do not reduce global emissions drastically and soon, catastrophe will hit; and to reduce these emissions now everybody has to make a relatively small sacrifice in order to avoid much greater harm later-on. There is a fundamental flaw in this view, however. If climate change represents an economic externality, as is generally agreed, then internalizing it provides an opportunity not only to make some people (in particular later generations) better off, but nobody (also not the present generation) worse off, (a Pareto improvement). Unfortunately, this uncontested result of economic analysis is widely ignored in climate debates. It implies that well-designed climate policies can lead to advantages in the short AND the long term. Therefore, it is urgent to intensify the search for such policies: what is required today is not more sacrifice, but more intelligence and a bit of wisdom.

Sharing this insight and translating it into actions is urgent if climate policy is to overcome its current deadlock. And it is particularly urgent if Europe is to regain a significant role in the coordination of global affairs. Europe has an opportunity to develop and implement win-win strategies for climate policy. This opportunity is worth seizing for the sake of climate protection, of European integration, and of bringing the capability of global coordination to the level required by today's global challenges.