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Two Degrees Of Common Sense

The trip wire fixed by Copenhagen offers us a renewed chance to reverse climate change

By

No doubt, 2009 was one of the most challenging years in recent memory. Much that we took for granted changed under our feet. From giants of industry testing and breaking the too big to fail hypothesis to the global financial system unravelling before our eyes, 2009 reminded us that change will come whether we like it or not. The best we can do is to be prepared.

While most of the world is recovering from the economic slump, hundreds of thousands of those who lost jobs still struggle. And millions more, who do not have access to the very basics of sustenance, continue to exist on the fringes of our consciousness. Though the economic recovery is underway, that is not what we will remember 2009 for; it will always be the year where we tried, and failed, to achieve a comprehensive global deal to combat climate change.

Climate change is the definitive challenge of our lifetime. Even as the debate plays out in the media, most of us do not see climate change as a clear and present danger. But the fact is it will impact our lives, and for millions it already has. Radical changes in weather patterns are now common. From parched farmlands to flooded cities, extreme weather events occur at an ever-increasing frequency. Melting glaciers, drying rivers and rising oceans are all well-documented fact. They have our attention, but do they have our commitment to action?

During the 15th conference of parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP15) in December, the issue of climate change dominated the international agenda for two weeks. But sadly, we are back to the business of living. We forget climate change is not a headline, a clever website or a plea to save polar bears; it is a clear and present threat to the world. We need it to be a global priority. And we must act in concert to reverse it. COP15 was supposed to deliver this message. But it did not. It was intended to deliver a globally binding contract to cut emissions to stop and reverse global warming; it did not. It produced an accord that nations took note of. Unfortunately, the changing climate will not pause to take note. Politics won in Copenhagen, people did not. But the future is not all fire and doom. I am an optimist; 2009 showed us how far politics could go; 2010 is the time to act.



The 20th century brought unimaginable progress. But this has not been without a price – carbon emissions – that must be paid if not today, then certainly tomorrow. The march of progress has been the defining quality of mankind, as has been fighting for the greater good. Today, the greater good is to protect the future of the world by recognising and mitigating the carbon cost. A key trip wire to check this change is to cap the temperature rise to under 2°C between 2000-levels and 2050. We can only achieve this by limiting emissions. For this, we need an energy revolution; one we have already started.

For centuries, our primary method of harnessing energy has been fire – burning wood, coal, oil or gas. But the future will be different. We will tap nature without depleting it, renewing our energy sources every day. That future is already here. Renewable energy technologies are today in our life like never before. From the ubiquitous solar calculators and large-scale mainstream wind farms that power factories and cities, to newer but no less exciting technologies such as tidal and geo-thermal, we have harnessed the abundant energy in nature and proved that we can develop without consuming all that is around us.

This promise is not just in technology, but application and deployment as well. Renewables today are highly commercialised. For example, utility-scale wind power is already operating in over 70 countries, with an installed base of over 120,000 MW at the end of 2008. The technology and products are tested and proven. What we need are the mandates to achieve this renewable future. There are good examples. Europe has set itself a target that 20 per cent of all its energy must come from renewables by 2020. Australia aims to achieve 20 per cent of all power from renewables in the next decade; several US states have set targets, as have many other nations including India and China.

Our Defining Challenge

As millions in the developing world improve their lives, the need for power will only grow. While one part of the world exists on less than 700 KW per hour per-person per-year, another part uses over 14,000 KW/h. We cannot ask one part of the world to lower its standard of living. Nor can we ask the other not to aspire to a better life. What then is the solution?

Quite simply: renewable energy. Wind energy alone can provide more than the entire world's power needs, and the sources are in plenty. According to the Global Wind Energy Council, wind power could generate 2,600 TW/h of electricity and save 1.5 billion tonnes of CO₂ emissions in 2020. Wind alone can help cut nearly 10 per cent of the world's carbon emissions by 2030. This potential growth cuts through all the political debate between the developed and the developing world. The developing world has an even greater opportunity; nations such as India and China can step away from the old model of development, and invest in radical efficiency and renewable technologies to secure sustainable development.

This realisation is sinking in ever more. When I attended COP15, I felt – while governments debated – the summit had succeeded in one important measure: bringing together the key influencers from the world over who recognise this challenge and are acting in unison. The UN summit was on the ground a united front of people. This is not a fringe anymore, on the ground I met national and regional leaders, captains of industry, heads of utilities, researchers, policymakers, financiers, bankers and individuals – all of whom recognised the challenge, and are doing their share, and often more, to combat this threat.

2010 will bring forth a new set of leaders in the fight against climate change — individuals and private enterprise, who will lead the change in bringing technology, products and services to help people embrace and advocate a low-carbon lifestyle. Be it installing solar panels on your roof or asking your utility to invest in wind to provide you with clean electricity, the choice will be yours. Without a doubt, 2010 will be an exciting year for renewable energy. Climate change is a big challenge, and the solution is clear. There are sizeable funds awaiting investment opportunities, pent-up demand and clear government mandates for action in the renewable sector. There is more to be done — stronger targets and governance, priority lending, fast-track permissions and other supports — but we are on our way.

Every generation has a defining challenge; this is ours. 2010 offers us the renewed chance and hope to meet this challenge and prevail. At stake is the world.

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