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Protester in Copenhagen in December 2009. © picture-alliance/dpa

[Interview with Thomas Loster]

“25 countries are not enough”

After the failure of the Copenhagen Summit, the question arises whether international climate diplomacy can achieve anything at all. Thomas Loster of the Munich Re Foundation assessed the outlook for the Cancún summit in December.

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If hopes to prevent global temperatures from rising more than two degrees Celsius on average are not to be dashed completely, what is the minimum Cancún must deliver?

The 2°C target is already more or less acknowledged internationally. The best possible result would be a legally binding commitment to this target. Such a step would allow us to calculate precisely how much carbon countries are allowed to emit in the future. The atmosphere can only take another 750 gigatons of carbon. So if emission rights were spread evenly over the world’s population, it would be a mere question of arithmetic what limit every country has to accept, and we could use emissions trading to even things out. However, a roadmap for further talks is probably the best we can realistically hope for in Cancún. I would certainly consider such an outcome a success.

What progress is possible on adaptation to climate change?

That differs from one country to another. The urgency of adaptation – along with mitigation – is now appreciated across the international community, and work on adaptation concepts is moving ahead. The NAPAs – the National Adaptation Plans of Action – for the least developed countries are an example. Funds for adaptation programmes are also starting to flow, such as the “fast track” money pledged in Copenhagen last year. For countries that draft strong adaptation strategies of their own, as Bangladesh is currently doing, the outlook is promising. At the global level, however, we are just beginning to tackle the issue.

In climate jargon, REDD stands for “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation”. What do you anticipate in

this area?

I welcome the fact that the issue is increasingly being addressed. Forestry emissions account for some 20 % of annual anthropogenic greenhouse emissions – which is more than the entire emissions of the EU. But the issue is still very controversial. REDD received a certain amount of backing at Copenhagen. A good outcome would be if the technical committees agreed on principles or demands for sustainable forest management, which would then be included in the draft protocol.

Considering global fairness, what is the least that must happen?

The main principles of fairness – such as the satisfaction of basic human needs or fair opportunities for future generations – have long been accepted. They just need to be fully observed. Let’s return to REDD: some 60 million people of many different indigenous groups depend on forests. Is adequate account taken of their needs? In my view, the principle of respect for fair and transparent processes is essential in the context of climate change. Every country affected must be heard. At the end of the Copenhagen summit, only around 25 countries were involved in drafting the final document. That is not enough. It was almost predictable that the result would not be - accepted at the final plenary.

Who can assume a leading role given that US President Barack - Obama looks stuck in domestic-politics gridlock?

Copenhagen made it clear to everyone that the climate summit is actually an economic summit, and that the G2 – the United States and China – felt that they had the say. We will never rise to the challenges without the USA or China on board. Europe must try to assume a - more prominent role. If we cannot move on from a G2 to a G3 or G3+, it will be hard to achieve any outcome. Germany once had a very good reputation for showing initiative on climate protection. If that reputation is to be restored, our country’s Christian Democrat-Liberal coalition government needs to do a lot more than it has so far.

Questions by Hans Dembowski.

Thomas Loster

is the chairman of the Munich Re Foundation and a member of D+C/E+Z’s advisory board. In cooperation with Misereor, the Foundation recently funded an interdisciplinary study on how to tackle climate change. The book “Global, aber fair” (Global, yet fair) was published by C.H Beck, Munich.

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