

Major international meetings rarely result with recognition of abject failure. If the prospects for success look bleak, the job of senior officials and ministers is to reframe objectives, lower expectations, devise productive "next stages" or "roadmaps", and generate hopeful if non-substantive declarations of intent.

In the worst case, meetings can be postponed, or, exceptionally, cancelled. The organisers of the UN Climate Change Conference, scheduled for December 7 to 18 in Copenhagen, do not have the luxury of cancellation or postponement. Yet it is necessary to consider alternatives if the conference indeed concludes fruitlessly.

This 15th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will take place, whether or not the outcomes are likely to be useful. And absent a significant breakthrough in the next six weeks, on December 19 the global community will not have advanced materially towards the overarching goal of checking or reversing the increased levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Reflecting the dedication and professionalism of the COP 15 delegates, the meeting will produce a range of agreements to keep talking about a collection of subjects too technical for most

Copenhagen. The emphasis is on accomplishing enough to keep the negotiating round alive past the COP 15 meeting. The alternatives at that point will be fairly clear – continue with a flawed process or seek a new way forward. The first option is ill-advised, given the evidence of accelerating climate change and the demonstrable inability of 192 parties to reach agreement on highly technical, multi-sectoral, rapidly evolving global issues.

But if significant changes to the current approach are to be adopted, they must be grounded in the recognition that the decisions required are quintessentially political in nature.

It is clear that climate change can only be dealt with through a package deal. If the need for a package is generally recognised, however, the elements are still in major dispute (as is their sequencing). The nub of the problem is that developing countries are totally unwilling to accept greenhouse gas caps unless developed countries pay for the impact this would have.

Meanwhile, if developed countries are to meet the conditions laid down by developing countries for participating in a climate change deal, significant impacts will be felt in Western economies which remain fragile in the wake of the recent financial crisis. And even if developed country leaders make major concessions, the level of mutual distrust is such that developing country leaders will be hard-pressed for domestic political reasons of their own to come on board.

Baldly stated, to achieve change on this scale, a major exercise of political will affecting national positions across a range of sectors will be needed. This sort of multi-

outsiders to understand. So the several days of talk will not have been entirely in vain. With luck, the areas of disagreement will have been further defined and some of the "low hanging fruit" will have been picked. The shape of future agreements may be more evident, but it's doubtful that meaningful, binding commitments directly affecting the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere will have been made.

Current expert assessments of the state of play agree that too much technical work remains to be done for a definitive, comprehensive successor agreement to the Kyoto Accord to emerge from

