

Argus Q&A: Elliot Diringer

Elliot Diringer is vice president for International Strategies at the Pew Center on Global Climate Change in Washington, DC. He oversees analysis at the center on the international challenges posed by climate change and strategies for meeting them. He also directs the center's outreach to key governments and actors involved in international climate negotiations. He came to the Pew Center from the White House, where he was deputy assistant to the president and deputy press secretary. In this capacity, he served as a principal spokesman for President Bill Clinton. He previously served as senior policy advisor and as director of communications at the Council on Environmental Quality, where he helped develop major policy initiatives, and led the White House communications strategy on the environment. He also was a member of US delegations to climate change negotiations. Before that Diringer was an award-winning environmental journalist. In this interview, Diringer told Argus about the long road ahead for international climate negotiations and the need for countries to move forward in the meantime with domestic action.

Argus: You have said it may take three years or more to transform what was achieved at Copenhagen into a binding international agreement. Can you describe why it may take this long and whether this is necessarily the most urgent thing needed?

Diringer: The simple answer is that countries are not ready. The US, for instance, will need to have a mandatory climate program in place at home, or be on the verge of that, before it can negotiate a binding international commitment. And other countries are very reluctant to bind themselves without the US. There are three priorities right now: moving forward with domestic action; delivering on the promise of prompt-start assistance for developing countries; and creating the international structures envisioned in the Copenhagen Accord to support developing countries and to hold countries accountable for their pledges. All of these steps will help to build confidence. Moving forward domestically gives countries confidence in their own ability to act, and that others are acting too. As we build out the international framework, parties can see it taking shape, so they can be more confident that it can deliver. All of that will make it easier in time for countries to come to a binding international agreement.

Argus: You have said expectations were wildly inflated ahead of the Copenhagen. What was learned from Copenhagen that

should pay off ahead of the climate talks in Cancun in November?

Diringer: The lesson, which is not a new one, is that perceptions are heavily shaped by expectations. It was clear to us that a binding agreement in Copenhagen was highly unlikely, yet that was the expectation set by key players. They tried closer to Copenhagen to lower expectations, saying a political agreement was all that could be achieved, but it was too late. As a result, even though progress was made there, Copenhagen is widely viewed as a failure. The outcome is certainly far short of what is needed, but we now have explicit mitigation pledges from all of the major economies, and that is an important step forward. It appears the lesson has been taken to heart. Some of those who pushed hardest for a binding outcome in Copenhagen are already saying we will not have one this year in Cancun.

Argus: EU Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard said recently that the Mexico conference should focus on "practical" outcomes, such as filling in details on issues such as financing and deforestation. Do you agree? What types of issues are ripe for this type of progress in Cancun?

Diringer: I agree that the aim in Mexico should be some nuts-and-bolts decisions elaborating the mechanisms and guidelines envisioned in the Copenhagen Accord. It will need to be a balanced package, and right now some issues such as deforestation appear riper than others. There are two especially important and especially difficult areas. The first is accountability – in particular, deciding how developing countries are going to report on their actions, and the type of international "consultation and analysis" that will follow, as was agreed in the accord. The second area is finance – how to create the long-term architecture needed to generate and effectively deliver the support pledged for developing countries. Other major pieces are adaptation and technology. By focusing on these discrete areas, I think it may be possible to get a set of decisions effectively putting the accord into operation. Some parties will probably want to go further and adopt a new overarching decision. But that risks reopening the accord and, I think, bogging the negotiations down. It may be better this time to just aim for decisions on the nuts and bolts.

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Argus: Many Europeans tend to see the outcome of Copenhagen as a serious setback, with little achieved. What do you feel the achievements were and why do you think Europeans are quite as negative about it compared to Americans who attended the talks?

Diringer: I think the Europeans were especially disappointed not only because their expectations were too high, but also because they have made the strongest investment so far in climate action and they want to know that others are moving with them. There is a perception that the deal was cut between the US and China, India, Brazil and South Africa, and the Europeans were sidelined. The meeting between President Barack Obama and his four counterparts from the major developing countries was a pivotal moment. But the Europeans were deeply engaged throughout, and I think European leadership was in fact critical in setting the stage.

True, Copenhagen did not solve the climate problem. But it was a catalyzing event. First of all, it engaged world leaders – probably more deeply than any had ever imagined. I think they expected they would come to Copenhagen to bless the deal, not to negotiate it. Second, Copenhagen elicited explicit international pledges from all of the major economies – including the first ever from China and the other major emerging economies. Taken together, those pledges do not appear to put us on track toward limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius, the goal set in the accord, but they are an important start. Third, the accord sets specific goals for the level of support to be provided to developing countries — \$30bn between now and 2012, with the aim of mobilizing \$100bn in public and private resources by 2020. Finally, the accord represents some key political understandings

that, with some careful diplomacy and stronger political will, can hopefully translate over time into an effective international framework. Perhaps most critical among these are the understandings on transparency and accountability.

Argus: What do you think the outcome in Copenhagen implies for the future of the global carbon market?

Diringer: The Copenhagen Accord doesn't speak very directly to market mechanisms, and I think that reflects the ambivalence among parties about how prominent a role they should play as the international architecture evolves. Clearly, many developing countries would like to see strong offset markets they can sell into, but some feel that developed countries should bear the full burden of their emission reductions at home. So decisions on the future of the Clean Development Mechanism or any new crediting mechanisms are still ahead. I think the accord's real influence on the carbon market depends on whether it helps give countries the confidence to move forward with their own domestic trading programs. It is the domestic and regional systems, more than the international framework, that will drive future demand.

Argus: What role do you see for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) moving forward? Does the fact that the Copenhagen Accord was the result of direct talks between just a few nations weaken the UNFCCC process?

Diringer: Copenhagen exposed some of the weaknesses of the UNFCCC process – in particular, how easy it is for a handful of countries to gum up the works. But I think it is a little too simple to blame the outcome on the process. The process can only de-

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liver what the politics will allow. In the case of Copenhagen, you had a last-minute deal that for many countries seemed to drop from the sky, and there really wasn't time at the point to work through the politics. So I do not think Copenhagen represented a definitive test of the process. As far as most parties are concerned, the UNFCCC remains the central forum going forward. The challenge is figuring out how to translate the Copenhagen Accord, which is a political agreement technically outside the process, into practical decisions within the UNFCCC. Discussions among smaller groups of countries are key to advancing that agenda. The Major Economies Forum and the G20 are likely to continue to provide an important space for complementary discussions among key parties that, hopefully, can forge the stronger consensus needed to achieve broader agreement within the UNFCCC.

Argus: Where do climate change negotiations seem to be heading in the Senate? What are your expectations here and what could a successful outcome mean to the rest of the world?

Diringer: It is encouraging that the White House and key Senate leaders are very actively exploring options for moving a bill forward this year. Even if we do not see final legislation in this Congress, the international community will be watching closely for signs of progress. It will be important for the administration to be able to show in Mexico that it has a strategy for fulfilling its

conditional pledge of reducing US emissions "in the range of" 17pc by 2020. Another major concern is how the US generates its share of the \$100bn pledged for developing countries in 2020. The Waxman-Markey bill passed by the House would be likely to produce the necessary flows, but a scaled-down bill might not.

Argus: Can you sum up the relative importance of a bottom-up approach in relation to a top-down approach when it comes to developing climate policy?

Diringer: Sometimes people argue about "top down" versus "bottom up" as if it is an either-or choice. I think, rather, they define two ends of a continuum. In its purest form, "bottom up" implies that countries have full flexibility in deciding the nature and ambition of their nonbinding pledges. "Top down," on the other hand, implies binding emission targets derived from a collective goal with strong international enforcement. What we need is something in between an international framework that is flexible enough to ensure broad participation, and binding enough so that parties can be reasonably confident that others will fulfill their commitments. The Copenhagen Accord is largely bottom up. It is nonbinding and it gives developing countries full flexibility in defining their pledges (although developed countries all agreed to articulate theirs as economy-wide reduction targets). The challenge now is to move further toward the "top down" end of the continuum by fleshing out the regime in a way that allows it to evolve over time toward a binding framework.

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