

Can we be pleased with the progress we have made in the development of energy efficiency and the mitigation of climate change?

An IISD Commentary

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The following commentary by IISD's [Mark Halle](#) responds to a question posed by [Comment:Visions](#) and [European Voice](#) for their December 2009 issue.

“As the first decade of the 21st Century closes, can we be pleased with the progress we have made in the development of energy efficiency and the mitigation of climate change?”

I cannot think of any honest professional who could answer this question in the positive. Indeed, as formulated, the question would appear to betray an ingenuousness of titanic proportions.

In adopting the UNFCCC in 1992, the world community vowed to keep greenhouse gases below dangerous levels. In adopting the Kyoto Protocol, it set targets for a number of the countries responsible for the greatest emissions, calculated in most cases to reduce their emissions by a set proportion below 1990 levels. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we are badly failing on both commitments.

What are “dangerous levels”? IPCC has repeatedly lowered its assessment of what these levels might be, and every time they do so, the current trends present an ever-greater gap between what we believe to be cautious and the reality we are likely to see in a few years’ time. Country after country has failed to meet its Kyoto commitments. Some, like the United States, have not only failed to join the protocol but have spent most of the decade actively undermining and discrediting it. Others, like Canada, have signed but have taken no convincing steps towards meeting their target. Where progress has been made—as in the case of Germany—it has more to do with the shut-down of industry in the newly absorbed East Germany than with domestic efforts to boost energy efficiency and mitigate climate change.

No, we are moving further from meeting the challenge with every day that passes. Rhetoric is not matched by action. Expectations are revised downwards, recalling the cartoon character Calvin pointing out to his pet tiger Hobbes that “if you keep lowering expectations, you will reach a point where those expectations are inevitably met.” Unfortunately, the value of the achievement is reduced to close to zero in the process.

We are being failed by our leaders, who routinely give way to special interests rather than protecting the public good. In the process, they are betraying the trust implied in their oath of office. We all know this. We all lament it. And yet we accept it because we can’t think of anything better. It is a recipe for driving over the cliff.

On the eve of the Copenhagen COP, we have lowered expectations so far, it recalls the pop culture title by Richard Fariña: *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me*. We all hope to be pleasantly

surprised by Copenhagen, but we are all secretly girding ourselves to explain away a disappointment. But pleased with the progress we have made...? C'mon.