

Linking Climate Policy and Sustainable Development: There Are Simply Benefits!



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Climate change and sustainable development are frequently treated as siloed issues. In my personal experience, many climate policy practitioners regard sustainable development impacts of climate action as “co-benefits”: nice to have but at the end of the day not really important for climate policy. On the other side, sectoral policy makers frequently neglect climate change, as evidenced by ongoing planning on coal-based electricity generation or car-based transport infrastructure.

However, there now seems to be some momentum to break up these silos. The recent *Marrakech Climate Change Conference* saw a large number of side events and discussions on the interlinkages between climate policy and sustainable development in a broader sense, particularly triggered by the UN’s *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. Bursting the climate policy bubble, one needs to take note that for most people climate policy “co-benefits” are core benefits. What people care about first and foremost are issues like employment, housing, functioning energy and transport infrastructure, clean air, liveable cities. This holds especially for developing countries, who have always maintained that development and poverty eradication are their overriding priorities.

At the same time, there is increasing recognition that the positive impacts of decreasing fossil fuel use go far beyond reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Energy efficiency and renewable energy increase local value creation and reduce import dependency as well as emissions of a range of pollutants. The annual death toll of local air pollution from fossil fuels numbers in the millions globally. Cities that prioritise infrastructure for public and non-motorised transport instead of cars are more liveable cities. The list of benefits could be continued at some length. One Marrakech side event summarised findings from around 1,000 academic papers showing how the multiple benefits of reducing fossil fuel use can outweigh the costs. Accordingly, the increasingly progressive climate policy stance by countries such as China is strongly motivated by their air pollution problems – with greenhouse gas reductions as a co-benefit.

Representatives of the *C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group*¹ therefore pleaded for doing away with the distinction of benefits and co-benefits: “There are simply benefits”.

What seems to be missing is a way forward for better linking the agendas in practice. Under the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*, the question is whether it is possible to liberate sustainable development from its “co-benefit” ghetto and leverage the momentum generated by the adoption of the *SDGs* for enhancing climate ambition. At the same time, the question is how climate change can be better integrated into sectoral policies. The goal of remaining below the 2°C or even 1.5°C temperature limits as agreed on in the *Paris Agreement* will require fundamentally different ways of supplying energy, building cities, etc. The need to reduce emissions to zero will therefore need to be written into the DNA of all sectoral policies.

¹ www.c40.org

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