

Months before the Cancun talks even begin, it was already clear that no one was expecting a binding climate agreement.

Expectations have shifted from reaching a legally binding agreement, critical for pushing governments to take actions and measures against the impacts of climate change, toward manageable, if not pragmatic, targets like decisions on mitigation commitments and green funds.

The Indonesian delegation to the Cancun conference, led by climate envoy Rachmat Witoelar, has been tightlipped about ambitions for a new treaty to reduce emissions, setting their sights instead on next year's talks in South Africa to strike a deal.

The delegation only promises to bring home results from Cancun that would benefit national interests, mainly on "reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation" regularly referred to as "REDD". REDD is a detailed plan touted as one of the most affordable options to lower global greenhouse gas emissions, whereby developing nations reap cash dividends for protecting, restoring and managing forests in sustainable ways.

Indonesia, home to the world's third largest national rainforest area with 120 million hectares, may have a vested interest in the plan, as it is one of few nations that have already started its own style of REDD pilot projects.

But as host of the Bali climate talks in 2007, which unsuccessfully "mandated" all parties ink a deal in Copenhagen, this implies no harm for Indonesia, which once again could play a much larger leadership role at Cancun.

The Indonesia delegation could at least push for the needed building blocks agreed to in Cancun to ensure that a binding treaty will be struck in South Africa next year, a year before the Kyoto Protocol expires — the only treaty which limits emissions from industrialized countries until 2012.

It is true that this year's climate talks still have some sticking points that need to be resolved.

The mounting agenda facing the upcoming conference will not only involve setting climate negotiations back on track, but more than that, it should rebuild trust and help bridge the widening gap between developed and developing countries, mainly because the world's top two emitters — the US and China — are not signatories to the Kyoto Protocol.

The negotiations in Cancun may become even more complicated as developed countries in Europe and elsewhere have backed away from earlier pledges to cut emissions, mainly because developing nations have yet to commit to their own involvement in global emission cuts.

Out there, emissions continue to rise.

The UN weather agency World Meteorological Organization warned Wednesday that concentrations of the main greenhouse gasses — blamed for increasing radiation in the atmosphere and warming the Earth — have reached their highest level since pre-industrial times, and the concentrations continued to increase in 2009 despite the global economic downturn.

The latest report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) said that even if every nation honored the reduction pledges they made in the Copenhagen Accord, it would only represent 60 percent of the needed cuts to keep global temperatures from rising by more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, which scientists say is necessary to prevent catastrophe.

With such a gap between scientific facts and pledges, it is essential for climate negotiators to pick up the pace and come up with concrete results to save the planet. There is no time for chitchat at Cancun.