Domestic climate laws are essential, says UN

Legislation at national level essential because ‘it is linchpin between action on the ground and international agreement’

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Governments must enact domestic laws on climate change and greenhouse gas emissions if international efforts to stall global warming are to succeed, according to the UN’s climate chief.

Christiana Figueres, who is spearheading the push for a new global treaty on emissions, said that negotiations on a new agreement among nations would rely on progress being made on laws and regulations within countries, with the aim of cutting carbon or promoting alternatives to fossil fuels.

She said: "Domestic legislation is critical because it is the linchpin between action on the ground and the international agreement. At the national level, it is clear that when countries enact clean energy policies, investment follows. At the international level, it is equally clear that domestic legislation opens the political space for international agreements and facilitates overall ambition."

At an international conference in London on Monday she will urge more countries to set out national emissions plans or measures that benefit the development of low-carbon economies.

At the end of 2012, the first phase of the 1997 Kyoto protocol – the world’s only global treaty stipulating cuts in emissions – came to an end, with only a few countries agreeing to continue it in a smaller form until 2020. Instead, the world’s governments announced at the end of 2011 that they would craft a new global agreement, that would bind both developed and developing countries to sharp cuts in emissions, by 2015. That new agreement would come into force from 2020.

But the talks are on a tight deadline – the Kyoto protocol took five years to negotiate – and at the round that concluded in Doha last December there was little sign of progress. There, squabbles and disagreements meant that even minor matters went unresolved until the last moments of the fortnight-long conference, which dragged on as a result into a marathon 36-hour final session, ending more than a day late.

For years after the Kyoto protocol was signed, many governments were still reluctant to take measures that would cut emissions domestically, because of the perception that they might harm the competitiveness of their industries, and for fear that some countries with softer targets would have an unfair advantage. Many politicians and businesses argued that they should wait until there was a properly functioning international agreement on the climate, in order to make sure everyone was operating under similar constraints. However, as more investor attention has focused on clean technologies, and as countries have struggled with extreme weather, more measures have been brought forward.

Figueres believes those actions on national responses to climate change are building support and momentum for the international talks, and will ask governments to do more domestically at the meeting at the Foreign Office in London today.
Around the world, rich and poor countries are bringing forward their own legislation aimed at cutting emissions or encouraging the growth of new "clean" and low-carbon technologies. A report compiled by the Globe International organisation, a group of parliamentarians and lawmakers from around the world, and the Grantham Research Institute found that of 33 countries examined, all had moved forward on such rules, with one exception. That was Canada, which has abandoned the Kyoto protocol despite being one of its strongest supporters in the past, under intense lobbying from its burgeoning tar sands and fossil fuel industries.

However, although the countries examined – including ranging from major economies such as the US and China to poor nations such as Rwanda and Mozambique – had moved forward on legislation, the study did not grade its likely effectiveness and acknowledged that these measures alone would not be enough to bring about the cuts in emissions necessary to avoid dangerous levels of global warming.

Lord Deben, chairman of Globe and of the UK government's Committee on Climate Change, and a former UK environment minister, hailed the recent progress. He said the evidence of new legislation and the furtherance of measures already under way were positive signs and could make a major difference to the outcome of the UN talks.

He said: "The tide is beginning to turn decisively on tackling climate change, the defining material challenge of this century. [The progress detailed in the report] is a game-changing development, driven by emerging economies, but taking place across every continent. It challenges how governments look at the international negotiations up to 2015 [and shows the requirement for] much greater focus by governments to support national legislation."