

The long road to Paris

The recent history of efforts to tackle climate change by the international community tells a story of mixed achievements in a rapidly changing world. Can COP21 succeed where predecessors have failed?



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More than 20 years ago, most countries in the world signed and ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which aimed at the “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”. As a framework convention, it was the start of an open-ended, evolutionary process. It also explicitly distinguished between two categories of countries – developed and developing – on the basis of “common but differentiated responsibilities”, with developed countries having primary responsibility for mitigation and financial support. (While it does not define the terms ‘developed’ and ‘developing’, countries with responsibilities for mitigation and providing financial support are listed in the Convention’s Annex I and Annex II.)

Since then, the world has changed dramatically. In 1990, the developed countries listed in Annex I of the UNFCCC accounted for over 60 per cent of carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions from fossil fuel use and developing countries (i.e. those not listed in the annex) less than 40 per cent. Now the situation is almost reversed: in 2012, non-Annex I countries accounted for approximately 55 per cent of CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel use.

For example, China has outstripped both the EU and US to become the world’s largest emitter of CO₂. Indian emissions are also growing rapidly, though in per capita terms they remain well below the world average. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded in its most recent review, reducing climate risks will

require substantial and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (mostly CO₂, but also other gases such as methane and nitrous oxide), meaning action will be needed from all emitters.

The approaches taken under the UNFCCC have also changed to reflect this new reality. The legally binding but modest quantified emissions-reduction targets for developed countries under the Kyoto Protocol (by at least five per cent by 2012 compared to 1990) proved inadequate to the task. The US never ratified and Canada failed to meet its obligations and pulled out. Global fossil-fuel-related CO₂ emissions grew much faster after 2000 than in the 1990s. Participation has shrunk under the Kyoto Protocol’s second commitment period to 2020, leaving only 14 per cent of global emissions covered.

Kyoto legacy

However, Kyoto was an important driver of flexible, market-based approaches to climate policy. The development of the EU GHG emissions trading system and of robust accounting rules for GHG emissions, as well as a global GHG offsetting programme – the Clean Development Mechanism – are all part of Kyoto’s legacy.

Faced with gridlock at the Copenhagen UNFCCC conference in 2009, the US, China, Brazil, India and South Africa drafted the Copenhagen Accord (2009) that catalysed a new bottom-up approach based on ‘nationally determined’ mitigation pledges and began to bridge the sharp division between action by developed and developing countries.

This was mainstreamed into the UNFCCC process in the 2010 Cancún Agreements, along with an enhanced transparency regime to track implementation and commitments on financial support. More than 90 countries, including all major emitters, put forward pledges that took a variety of forms, mostly covering the period to 2020. In aggregate, they are not, however, thought to be ambitious enough to be consistent with a cost-effective emissions-reductions pathway to the long-term target agreed in Cancún in 2010 of keeping the increase in global

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average surface temperature to below 2°C. Countries’ plans for emissions reductions beyond 2020 are now being established.

Financing and adaptation

Financial support is a key element of this new approach. Developed countries pledged \$30 billion of so-called fast-start finance for the period 2010-12. They also committed in Cancún to mobilise \$100 billion each year by 2020 to support climate change actions in developing countries. The UN established a new facility under the UNFCCC for channelling climate finance, the Green Climate Fund, to provide balanced support for both adaptation and mitigation activities. As of early April 2015, it had received pledges of \$10.2 billion.

Continued emission of GHGs will cause further warming, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems. Not surprisingly, therefore, the focus on and support for adaptation actions has increased over time.

Starting in 2001, a series of processes under the Convention has resulted in tools, methodologies, greater expertise and the provision of financial and technical support for adaptation. There is greater emphasis on ensuring sufficient resources for adaptation as well as mitigation, and for countries to take stronger action to enhance

◀ **A demonstrator vents his frustration at COP17 in Durban, as representatives from civil society organisations and some of the most vulnerable countries protested at moves to delay action until 2020**

resilience and a more strategic approach to adaptation planning.

Cooperative and collaborative activities outside of, but reinforcing, the UNFCCC process have also gained momentum. Participation has greatly increased: attendance at Kyoto was under 10,000 participants, while Copenhagen exceeded 27,000. Paris this year may be larger still. Events such as the UN Climate Summit in September 2014 have helped to highlight the potential and necessary contribution of non-state actors to tackling climate change. In 2010, 20 countries were responsible for 80 per cent of CO₂ emissions. The US and China between them were responsible for about 40 per cent. Decisions taken by a smaller group of countries can therefore have an important impact where they align with and reinforce the UNFCCC process on mitigation issues.

The US-China announcement in late 2014 was important in injecting momentum into the global climate negotiations in advance of COP21. But it was also important at a practical level since both countries set out their respective emissions-reduction intentions beyond 2020 and agreed additional measures to strengthen and expand bilateral cooperation in areas such as clean energy R&D and advancing major carbon capture, utilisation and storage demonstrations.

A decisive shift is possible

Within the UNFCCC process, the annual Conference of the Parties (COPs) has become a focal point for knowledge-sharing outside the formal negotiation process. The momentum of the 2014 UN Climate Summit has been maintained and built upon by the current and upcoming presidents of the COP: Peru and France. They have launched the Lima-Paris Action Agenda, and view the collaborative and cooperative pledges and projects stemming from it as an integral part of the COP21 outcome at the end of 2015.

So how significant is the COP21 meeting? Paris could and should be the beginning of a dynamic and flexible process that allows all countries to contribute, in different measure reflecting their national circumstances, to



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reducing climate risks and building resilience to climate impacts. It aims to finalise a new multilateral agreement for tackling climate change that has been under negotiation for the last four years. This agreement should be universal, have legal force and come into effect from 2020. It is expected to cover mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology, capacity building and transparency.

COP21 will also allow the international community to review and take stock of the aggregate effect of the intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to emissions reductions post-2020. At COP19 in Warsaw, countries had agreed they would propose their INDCs before the Paris COP. The EU, US and China were the first to announce their intended mitigation efforts. Apart from China, these countries have also formally submitted their INDCs to the UNFCCC, as have states such as Switzerland, Norway, Mexico, Russia and Gabon. The UNFCCC will provide a first assessment of these contributions in November 2015. Many other organisations will be poring over the details to assess the implications for the governments' stated ambition to limit warming to 2°C. There is likely to be a gap in ambition.

The Paris agreement therefore needs to build in flexibility and strong review mechanisms to increase and update the ambition and effectiveness of mitigation action over time, for which the UNFCCC process is vital. Adequate and timely

▲ US Secretary of State John Kerry toasts with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing in November 2014 after their two countries announced an unprecedented joint plan to cut GHG emissions

financial support from developed countries will be critical to secure this.

Some developing countries will also require immediate support for adaptation, as well as longer-term support to build resilience. These calls for greater financial support come at a time when public coffers in developed countries remain under pressure. This places a premium on the need to mobilise significant private finance and improve the enabling conditions for investment.

If these complex issues can be successfully negotiated, the COP21 agreement has the potential over time to make a decisive shift in our collective efforts to limit climate risks. The long-term challenge is clear: GHG emissions reaching the atmosphere from energy, industry, transport and land use will have to decline towards around zero or below on a net basis by the end of this century.

The costs of both action and inaction on climate change will continue to increase the longer that action is delayed. While there remains a gap between action and ambition on emissions reduction, COP21 should help countries shape their near-term policies and actions into a cost-effective and credible pathway to the low-emission, climate resilient future we need. ●