

The COP21 Climate Summit: The Ambitions and Flaws of the Paris Agreement. Outcome of Deception and Bullying

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[United Nations](#)

Seeing the clapping and hollering enthusiasm from the likes of Al Gore and others in Paris, one would have thought the earth had been saved. "I now invite the COP to adopt the decision entitled the Paris Agreement outlined in the document," came the words of French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius. Then, the deluge. "Together, we've shown what's possible when the world stands as one," claimed an overly optimistic US President, Barack Obama.

The conclusion of COP21 did give us an environmental agreement, the first to impose various binding and voluntary measures within its remit that will first permit a peak of greenhouse gases globally before rapidly reducing.[1] It will attempt to limit the rise in global temperatures "well below" 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with the background target being 1.5°C (Art. 2.1(a)). A climate finance fund of \$100 billion per annum for developing countries by 2020, with further future finance, is to come from the pockets of developing states.

Delegates emphasised the historical sense of the occasion. A persistent theme to come through was that of "balance". In the Agreement, it was recognised that "global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions" would vary for developing country parties. Once reached, rapid reductions would take place forthwith "so as to achieve a balance between anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century, on the basis of equity, and in the context of sustainability development and efforts to eradicate poverty" (Art. 4.1).

Various environmental groups were certainly not convinced by the paperwork. The agreement, according to Friends of the Earth International, was a "sham," the outcome of deception and bullying. The developed countries, in short, had gotten away with the meanest of undertakings.[2] The problems of differentiation, to take one example of this purported sham, have been combated with a severely contorting bit of legalese termed Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities, In the Light of Different National Circumstances (Art 2(2)).

Other stinging criticisms were also mounted. Compensation mechanisms for irreparable damage have not been factored in; adequate finance will not be made available; and the proposed program will exceed the proposed temperature limit. The point was largely compounded by the memories of Copenhagen 2009, when the insistence on binding emission targets led to any prospective being scuppered.

The result, then, has been a new creature in the form of Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), many of which were submitted in advance of the meeting, and will be

a cornerstone of the agreement. When these are factored in, a target closer to three degrees is considered the more accurate outcome of the commitments. Data from Climate Analytics, ECOFYS, the New Climate Institute and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, suggests that the generated figure, based on the Paris undertakings, will come at 2.7°C by 2100.

Nick Deardon, director of the Global Justice Now group, took issue with the persisting disparity between developed and developing states on the subject. As for what was actually binding in the agreement, one could count only on some bare bones procedures: the submission of an emissions reduction target, for instance, and the regular review mechanism on reaching that goal. (The first review will take place in 2019, with a more thorough “global stocktake” (Art. 14) in 2023 followed by cuts to carbon emissions two years later.)

What otherwise stands out is Article 6(1), a wordy provision that puts the boot into binding obligations while giving a free hand to states, suggesting that flexibility is better than not. “Parties recognize that some Parties choose to pursue voluntary cooperation in the implementation of their nationally determined contributions to allow for higher ambition in their mitigation and adaptation actions and to promote sustainable development and environmental integrity.”

Is such a regime a genuine compromise on shouldering adequate and proportionate burdens? Not so, according to Deardon. “It’s outrageous that the deal that’s on the table is being spun as a success when it undermines the rights of the world’s most vulnerable communities and had almost nothing binding to ensure a safe and liveable climate for future generations.”[3]

Any arrangement worth its salt was going to have to go into the drawers of history to consider past wrongs, a sort of divvying up of resources that would require a dramatic shifting of wealth. That is simply not going to happen. The fund for \$100 billion, which is in turn hundreds of billions short, is small fare for what has taken place, and what is to come.

The interaction between humankind’s engagement with the environment has already produced a range of dystopian foretastes. Even climate change sceptics would find it hard to deny Beijing’s “red alert” for smog, declared on Monday by authorities in an effort to keep people in from the lethal air.[4] They would find it impossible to deny the increasing deaths from those living in cities which are becoming uninhabitable, or movement from areas which are vanishing. These are simply some features of the environmental devastation that require addressing.

COP21 seeks the vision of the de-carbonized globe; but it is highly questionable whether it will have the legs, and the lengths, to fulfil it. Kumi Naidoo of Greenpeace claims that, even if the wheel of climate action turned slowly, it had at least turned at Paris. “There’s much in this deal that frustrates and disappoints me, but it still puts the fossil fuel industry squarely on the wrong side of history.”[5] But after the chatter has been concluded in Paris, the implementation on home fronts will have to take place. Fossil fuel lobbies will continue their dirty work. (They are glaring absentees in the final text.) A hostile US Congress, rent with climate change sceptics, is already promising to make life for the administration interesting.

In any case, such measures are meaningless without a united front of seemingly disparate

interests, be they anti-austerity groupings on the one hand, or climate change activists on the other.[6] Environment, economy and politics are vast but related peas in a complex pod. In the aftermath of Paris, it is clear that COP21 was far from what Angelica Navarro, Bolivian trade and climate negotiator, would have wished for: the equivalent of a Marshall plan for planet earth.

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Notes

- [1] <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09.pdf>
- [2] <http://www.foei.org/press/archive-by-subject/climate-justice-energy-press/paris--climate-deal-sham>
- [3] <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-35084374>
- [4] http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1889215/how-china-has-gone--climate-villain-hero-just-six-years?utm_source=&utm_medium=&utm_campaign=-SCMPSocialNewsfeed
- [5] <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/news/Blogs/makingwaves/cop21-climate--talks-paris-negotiations-conclusion/blog/55092/>
- [6] <http://www.towardfreedom.com/32-archives/environment/4109-naomi-klein-we-are-going--backwards-cop21-the-opposite-of-progress>

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