

The Paris agreement - what does it mean for our future?

The UN climate change conference in Paris in December reached an agreement between 190 countries. That in itself is a miracle, and the congratulatory press coverage reflected that. For many people and countries fighting to get an agreement with potential to prevent catastrophic climate change, the agreement contains comforting wording – efforts to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees and if possible below 1.5 degrees rise, above pre-industrial levels.

However, we are already inevitably going to face a level of climate change dangerous for human life because of inadequate action so far. For those of us seriously interested in preventing catastrophic climate change, then, we need to understand if and how the Paris agreement will do that. Should we agree with George Monbiot, writing in the Guardian that “By comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster” or is there a more optimistic reading?

Firstly, no emissions cuts are required before 2020. So until then, emissions will be rising in most countries. Another big challenge for humanity is that it is based on **voluntary** pledges to cut emissions. Governments have obligations to submit regularly their proposals for reducing emissions, but there is NO enforcement mechanism for governments who submit weak proposals. So governments submit what they are willing to do, and not what the science requires. At present, the sum of all national emissions reductions put on the table before Paris would lead to a temperature rise of between 2.7 and 3.7 degrees Celsius before 2100. Excluded from these proposals for emissions reductions are emissions from aviation and shipping, which are rising fast.

In order for developing countries to reduce the growth rate of their emissions, they need investment in technology that will assist them – such as solar and wind power. The original climate change convention agreed in 1992 promised that developed countries would provide funds to do this. In Copenhagen, the one promise made by governments was that \$100bn would be placed in the Green Climate Fund annually up until 2010. Only a fraction of this money has been placed in that fund, and Paris did not promise to improve on this. Sadly, too, though the need for adaptation, and the recognition that some countries face loss and damage beyond the reach of adapting to climate change, the funding needed to enable large-scale support to the poor and vulnerable populations facing daily disaster was not forthcoming.

Extraordinarily, the Paris agreement text of 32 pages does not mention the words fossil fuel, coal, oil or gas (this would have been vetoed by countries exporting these fuels.) No mention is made of the need for transition to renewable energy. Nor of the fact that industrial agriculture and deforestation are also driving climate change and the need to find ways to rein in these two sectors.

Despite the very limited nature of what was agreed in terms of the scale of the problem, there are grounds for optimism. A bottom-up approach (i.e. voluntary emissions cuts) rather than cuts enforced through some international mechanism was clearly the only way forward. More than 180 countries have submitted their pledges, and this shows a greater commitment than ever before to taking action. The commitments are public, and will be reviewed every five years, enabling countries to be held accountable by their own people.

To keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees means more than 80% of known fossil fuel reserves must stay in the ground – yet no limits are proposed on fossil fuel extraction or on subsidies. There is so much scope for citizen action to influence what actually happens. Lobbying to end fossil fuel subsidies – globally \$5300bn – would release huge sums for climate action and would lead to renewable technologies becoming much more favourably priced compared with fossil fuels. Divestment by companies, local government and individuals can be effective at putting pressure on the fossil fuel industry to show it needs to diversify its activities. In 2015, the G7 did commit to phasing out these subsidies – but only by 2100; it needs to happen NOW – plenty of scope for citizen action here!

Fossil fuel companies including BP have asked governments to be clear about the policy framework needed to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees – implying that once they have a framework, they will adapt their business. 53 large companies have committed to using 100% renewable energies by 2020 and ten other global companies have committed to making reductions in their emissions. Companies taking the strongest climate action outperformed. Bloomberg's index of top performing companies by 10% between 2010-2014. Many businesses are pressing for policy change that would support energy transition, such as those who signed the Wiltshire Declaration in 2015 (<http://wiltscan.co.uk/signatories/>).

National governments, even our current government, can be influenced by business opinion and citizen action. Christiana Figueres, the Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change thanked the people who had made pilgrimages to Paris, for their walking and praying, as she felt that this had helped in achieving the Paris agreement. This indicates that the small things we do in our ordinary lives have a significance beyond themselves – they also come together to speak to those in power and give them a mandate for further action. We citizens can show that we are willing to make lifestyle changes rather than deny our children and grandchildren a liveable future, and we can influence our neighbours, and this will, in turn, put pressure on MPs.

Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org, and US environmental leader, remarked after Paris “this didn't save the planet, but it may have saved the chance of saving the planet.” Let us take this chance to do what we can do locally.

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