

A landmark Paris accord on climate change: A comment

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After two weeks of complicated and exhausting talks at the Conference of Parties to the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris, 195 nations agreed on 12 December to the largest climate deal ever, aimed at reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. In and of itself, the Paris Conference signified a positive outcome to long-term multilateral efforts to address the risks of climate change, bringing together many stakeholders, but most importantly, governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations. Given the relentless pace of global warming caused by carbon-dioxide emissions, and its dire consequences including melting ice caps, rising sea levels, unusual weather events – be they record rainfalls or heavy storms, devastating heat waves and droughts – and many other negative impacts on the environment, already present or highly probable in the immediate future, the outcome of the Conference goes far beyond its indisputable diplomatic significance. In fact, this collective effort embodies credible pledges by Parties to the Agreement to include nature in any environment-oriented future action, including recognition of the role of tropical forests in curbing emissions. The recognized need to move forward with clean-energy technologies produced by the signatories serves as a guidance for all nations to embrace required modifications in their policies in an attempt to limit the global temperature rise to a level well below 2°C, and to adapt to climate-change impacts already unfolding. However, the poverty dimension was also highlighted by the drafters of the text: in the words of the Agreement, it ‘... aims to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty ...’.

There are both optimists and skeptics among the commentators in the wake of the Conference. A key feature of the Paris accord – an enhanced attention to scientific evidence during essentially diplomatic discussions – was highly praised. Such attention to the accumulated scientific evidence was an important breakthrough and, being an undercurrent during the discussions, was also taken into account when other dimensions, such as financial and administrative dimensions, of the Agreement were discussed. In this sense, high-level political commitments to increase the joint ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and to foster climate resilience were clearly a reflection of the growing awareness and concerns of the international community regarding the plight of future generations, an attempt to broaden time horizons beyond the immediate preoccupations and policy priorities. Many influential policy makers around the world became open to the warnings made by leading scientists about irreparable damage to the Earth, our common home, in the absence of the required urgent action to reduce the risks of global warming.

The pledge of the developed-country Parties to provide financial resources to assist developing-country Parties with respect to both mitigation and adaptation is combined with the core principle of collective responsibility embodied in the Agreement, meaning that all signatories have to do their share to achieve a common good, including the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases among the developing countries. The important issues of mutual trust and transparency were not overlooked either in that context. The Agreement requires regular and transparent reporting of the carbon reductions by every country within the framework of ‘nationally determined contributions’.

Building upon ‘enhanced transparency’ and ‘build-in flexibility’ the Agreement stipulates that ‘the purpose of the framework for transparency of action is to provide a clear understanding of climate change action’ in the light of the objectives of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, ‘including clarity and tracking of progress towards achieving individual nationally determined contributions ..., adaptation actions ..., including good practices, priorities, needs and gaps, to inform the global stocktaking ...’

The skeptics among the commentators often point out the voluntary nature of the agreements and the lack of a mechanism for their enforcement. Some others are saying that the negotiations resulted in a deal that falls far short of staving off the worst effects of climate change, but at the same time gave all of us something the world surely needs – a sense of hope that tangible results can be achieved through a long overdue change in policies. In any case, the climate deal is seen by many as a correct road that leads to forward-looking policies to decarbonize the economy at the lowest cost.

The hardest part of the deal – delivery of the results – begins now, and the stakes are very high. The behavior of national governments will be the ultimate testament of their commitment to the agreed goals. Much will depend on their ability to create proper incentives for businesses, particularly those operating in energy and heavy-industry sectors, using various tools such as taxes, special allowances, or credits aimed at cutting emissions, facilitating green investment and promoting clean-energy technologies. Some of those measures have been already tried, but the results are mixed and much more needs to be done. In many countries, coal still remains a predominant fuel used for electricity generation, exacerbating the pollution levels. Globally, renewable energy sources still account for about 10 percent of total energy supply, with most of that coming from hydroelectric power. But after the Paris agreements, carbon impacts and harmful emissions can no longer be ignored when the private sector prepares business plans. At the same time, the realities of today’s global energy markets are not particularly favorable to pollution-reducing efforts: the declining price of crude oil and natural gas, in the absence of international agreement on a carbon tax or other similar arrangements, actually facilitates the use of fossil fuels at a time when the environmental costs of burning such fuels are raising.

While the negative consequences of climate change do not respect national boundaries, making inhabitants of both developed and developing countries suffer, for people living in poor countries the costs of environmental degradation are often much higher, and climate-resilient development is more difficult to achieve. When poverty is rampant, forcing people to survive from one day to another, then the lofty goals of ‘green growth’ and sustainable development pale in comparison with the immediate needs of those people. It is widely admitted that the efforts aimed at poverty eradication are closely linked with mitigation and adaptation policies. In this sense, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement should be seen as mutually complementary and reinforcing global programs.

At the same time, the adoption of the aspirational and action-oriented 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development creates a window of opportunity for all stakeholders – member states, civil society, and the private sector – to join forces in finding new solutions to most pressing development challenges, including leading social policy issues. The International Council on Social Welfare – one of the oldest international non-governmental organizations promoting social justice, social welfare, and social development and dating back to 1928 – fully supports forward-looking efforts of the UN aimed at highlighting new approaches to social development and its quest for new ways and means that facilitate transformative steps required for shifting the world onto a sustainable footing.

The new policy space created for social development with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and shared understanding of the key concerns has to be explored and used at length at all levels,

taking into account specific regional- and country-level circumstances, and variation between and within countries. While different approaches and tools are at the disposal of each country, in accordance with national priorities, the new forms of economic and social risks as well as poverty, growing vulnerability, and insecurity must be addressed in a consistent manner, ensuring that a shared dream expressed by the international community that ‘no one is left behind’ does not remain only wishful thinking.

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For more details on the Paris Agreement, see <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/109.pdf>