

How do we go ahead?

Evaluation of outcomes of COP21 in Paris

Peter Pavlovic, European Christian Environmental Network & Conference of European Churches

The agreement in Paris has received positive evaluations from many sides. It has been labelled as an *'historic landmark,'* and *'the first universal and legally binding deal to tackle global warming.'* The major value of the Paris outcome is indeed the fact that nations of the world have been able to find a common language in talking about climate change as a serious challenge for the world and humanity of the 21st century. Two decades of negotiations under the auspices of the UN have culminated in an agreement which is acceptable for each participating party. It is a diplomatic masterpiece formulating a compromise between different blocks of interest of individual countries, geographical and political alliances, developed and developing or rich and poor, between those suffering the most dramatic impacts of climate change and those looking at it from a different perspective.

Optimism of political leaders

Politicians and world leaders praised the outcomes in unison:

UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon termed the agreement as a *"monumental triumph"* for planet Earth that will set the stage for achieving an end to poverty and development for all. *"This is truly an historic moment. For the first time, we have a truly universal agreement on climate change, one of the most crucial problems on earth."*

President Obama: *"This agreement sends a powerful signal that the world is fully committed to a low-carbon future. We've shown that the world has both the will and the ability to take on this challenge."*

Chancellor Angela Merkel: *"Paris will forever be remembered as a historic turning point in the global climate policy."*

David Cameron *"The treaty is a huge step forward in helping to secure the future of our planet."*

President François Hollande called the agreement as a *"major leap for mankind."*

President Zuma: *"Through this agreement, hope has been restored for a safe and prosperous future, where climate change will be adequately addressed."*

China termed the pact as *"a new beginning in international cooperation."*

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker: *"This robust agreement will steer the world towards a global clean energy transition. Today the world gets a lifeline, a last chance to hand over to future generations a world that is more stable, a healthier planet, fairer societies and more prosperous economies."*

Careful estimate of civil society

Civil society has been more cautious in its evaluation. WWF offers a mixed verdict based on three key points:

- *'The agreement includes some of the elements of an ambition mechanism such as 5-year cycles, periodic global stock-takes for emission reduction actions, finance and adaptation, and global moments that create the opportunity for governments to enhance their actions. However, the ambition and urgency of delivering climate action is not strong enough and will essentially be dependent on governments to take fast and increased action, and non-state actors, including cities, the private sector and citizens, to continue ambitious cooperative actions and to press governments to do more.'*

- *'The inclusion of a Global Goal on Adaptation as well as separate and explicit recognition for loss and damage are important achievements in the agreement. This goes a long way in raising the profile and importance of addressing the protection of those vulnerable to climate change. The agreement, however, does not go far enough in securing the support necessary for the protection of the poor and vulnerable.'*
- *'By including a long-term temperature goal of well below 2C of warming and a reference to a 1.5C goal, the agreement sends a strong signal that governments are committed to being in line with science. In addition the recognition of the emissions gap and the inclusion of a quantified 2030 gigatonne goal should serve as a basis for the revision of national pledges ahead of 2020.'*

According to Greenpeace: *'There is not enough in this deal for the nations and people on the frontlines of climate change. It contains an inherent, ingrained injustice. The text of the deal has been diluted and polluted by the people who despoil our planet.'*

Scepticism of climate science

The most critical voices in evaluating the agreement come from climate scientists. For most of them the outcomes do not reflect the scientific reality and the urgency to act.

Jean-Pascal van Ypersele, a Belgian climate scientist and until this year Vice Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC): *"But there is one party that is not represented: Nature. It is a party with whom nobody can negotiate."*

In the view of Kevin Anderson, Deputy Director of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in Manchester *"the current text is not consistent with science."*

"To have a two-thirds chance of limiting warming to 2C, emissions have to fall 40-70% by 2050. To have even a prayer of respecting the 1.5 C target, those mid-century cuts would have to be even deeper: 70-95%. These are dizzyingly difficult goals which effectively require the total decarbonisation of the world economy within four decades. But without these benchmarks – stripped from an earlier draft – the Agreement does not send a clear signal about the level and timing of emissions cuts. By the time the current pledges enter into force in 2020, we will probably have exhausted the entire carbon budget for the 1.5°C degrees target," warned Steffen Kallbekken, Director of the Centre for International Climate and Energy Policy.

James Hansen, a former top climate scientist at NASA was even more direct: *"This is a total fraud. We're not going to reduce emissions as long as we let fossil fuels be the cheapest form of energy. "*

Relevance of ethics

Political leaders acknowledged in Paris repeatedly that climate change is no longer a purely political issue manageable by power management and technological fixes. Paris confirmed that climate change has an ethical component which cannot be overlooked. The opening speeches of world political leaders attending the Paris summit demonstrated this fact at several instances. It was one of less expected moments of the Paris conference to follow the speeches of political leaders and count how many of them referred to the ethical components of climate change, appealed to the ethical frame or some of them even directly quoting from the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*. Words, which not on too many occasions come as being expressed at the top political level.

Paris acknowledged that climate change is the defining issue that humanity has to face in the 21st century and it is imperative to act. *'We have been for too long playing with a hypothesis*

evading the truth,' was an expression resonating in several speeches of country leaders present at the conference. In reflecting upon the situation, one of the most impressive statements was that one which stated that: *'we are the first generation to recognise the dramatic effects of climate change, and at the same time the last generation which can do something about it.'*

In looking at the content of the speeches, two points outlined along with the commitment and the necessity to act, deserve particular attention. The first is the acknowledgment that effective action against climate change will require a substantial transformation of economy as we know it nowadays, as it was expressed in several speeches by political leaders.

The second is the question of solidarity and what exactly does it include to face climate change and to address its adverse effect together, as one humanity. Solidarity and the need to address the adverse effects of climate change on most vulnerable countries have been confirmed as the necessary part of any effective way forward. However, the questions raised by one of the state leaders from one of the developing countries in Africa have certainly appealed to all who take this work seriously: *'What precise form will this advocated solidarity have? Is it fair to advocate for equality if one has everything and the other suffers poverty and degradation?'*

What the outcomes say and what has been omitted

The positive elements incorporated in the text are notoriously known and have been mentioned on several other occasions; the most important being:

- The achievement of the collective and legally binding agreement
- Contributing to transparency and trust building between different parties
- Periodic review and ratcheting up mechanism
- Recognising of the Loss and Damage mechanism
- Guaranteeing financial flows and technology transfers from industrialised to developing countries.

These are, on the other hand, counterweighted by series flaws. It is not only, as stated in some other evaluations, that the outcomes do not go far enough. The earnest failures and deficiencies are inherent in the approach characterised by the dominant political-economic paradigm. Some of them can be discovered by comparing the final version of the outcomes with one of the last drafts preceding the adoption. The most attention in this regard should be on the first articles of the agreement outlining the aims and objectives and the change of terminology used in the text.

From the originally stated 3 main aims of the agreement:

(a) To hold the increase in the global average temperature [below 1.5 °C] [or] [well below 2 °C] above preindustrial

levels by ensuring deep reductions in global greenhouse gas [net] emissions;

(b) To Increase their ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change [and to effectively respond to the

impacts of the implementation of response measures and to loss and damage];

(c) To pursue a transformation towards sustainable development that fosters climate resilient and low greenhouse gas emission societies and economies, and that does not threaten food production and distribution.

The first two have been kept in the final text. However, the aim of pursuing a transformation towards sustainable low carbon development has been deleted and replaced by the formula: *'Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development.'*

It is illustrative of the whole final text that the term 'transformation' has been systematically deleted from it. In the same spirit the final text avoids as well all instances of using terms such as decarbonisation, climate neutrality, or zero global GHG emissions indicated and the possible date for achieving it, although they were indicated in the earlier draft. The original text:

[Parties [collectively][cooperatively] aim to reach the global temperature goal referred to in Article 2 through:

(a) [A peaking of global greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking requires deeper cuts of emissions of developed countries and will be longer for developing countries]]

(b) [Rapid reductions thereafter [in accordance with best available science] to at least a X [-Y] per cent reduction

in global [greenhouse gas emissions][CO₂[e]] compared to 20XX levels by 2050]];

(c) [Achieving zero global GHG emissions by 2060-2080]

(d) [A long-term low emissions transformation] [toward [climate neutrality][decarbonisation] [over the course of this century] [as soon as possible after mid-century];

(e) [Equitable distribution of a global carbon budget based on historical responsibilities and [climate] justice]

[on the basis of equity and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities] [in the context of sustainable development and eradication of poverty][while ensuring that food security, production and distribution is not threatened][informed by the best available science].

Was transformed to the formula:

In order to achieve the long-term temperature goal set out in Article 2, Parties aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing country Parties, and to undertake rapid reductions thereafter in accordance with best available science, 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 sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty. [Art.4.1] This leads to the conclusion that from a multilevel description of aims which originally included potential timing for achieving zero global emissions and naming some instruments for achieving this aim as transformation, justice and decarbonisation, remained at the end only one dimensional aim to reach global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible, while recognizing that peaking will take longer for developing countries.

An interesting and appealing proposal of the earlier draft:

[An International Tribunal of Climate Justice is hereby established to address cases of non-compliance with the commitments of developed country Parties on mitigation, adaptation, provision of finance, technology development and transfer, capacity-building, and transparency of action and support, including through the development of an indicative list of consequences, taking into account the cause, type, degree and frequency of non-compliance.]

did not find its place in the final text.

In the same spirit neither the proposal: [*Develop modalities to implement the distribution of a global carbon budget based on climate justice, considering historical responsibilities, ecological footprint, capabilities, state of development and population;*] was found relevant enough for the final text.

Summing up these indications leads then to the conclusion of systematic evasion in the agreement of terms mentioning: climate justice, responsibility, historic responsibility, transformation, carbon budget or anything which could allude to them.

Next steps

An effective response to climate change will require rapid and strong action. It is an open question how far governments, responsible actors in politics, as well as all society and especially those in industrialised countries are ready for such action. To stay below 1.5C with a reasonable chance implies a very small remaining carbon budget. According to the IPCC's last synthesis report to stay within 1.5C means not to produce globally more than approximately 400bn tonnes of CO₂, calculated on the basis of year 2011. At current emission rates, that budget will be used up by about 2020.

In light of this decision the process outlined in the agreement, for the first global review in 2018 (COP Decision, para 20) and the 2020 deadline to submit nationally determined contributions for the cycle until 2025 (COP Decision, para 23-24) is far from sufficient.

This conclusion is supported by the measured climate data. According to the UK's Met Office 2015 is very likely to be the first year in which global warming reached already 1C above the average between 1850 and 1900.

In his first reaction to the Paris outcomes EU Commissioner responsible for climate action Miguel Arias Cañete, said: *'the EU negotiators had gone to Paris with a mandate for a 2C target but were forced to accommodate more ambitious demands from the most exposed countries. For sure, 1.5C is a trajectory of full decarbonisation and will require accelerated strategies and pathways.'*

Relying on technology, especially on the potential of negative emissions is one way, because in the absence of negative emissions, staying below the 2C and even more 1.5C commitment demands levels of reductions in emissions far beyond anything discussed during the Paris negotiations.

On the other hand, climate change may have an impact going far beyond anything seriously considered now, even with the implementation of new technologies, effect of which is on the top of it in the moment far from clear. According to Professor Michael Grubb of University College London: *'achieving 1.5C would require higher energy prices and more onshore wind farms. However much people profess to care about climate change, they do not seem willing to vote for this – nor do politicians seem willing to really try and persuade them. All the evidence from the past 15 years leads me to conclude that actually delivering 1.5C is simply incompatible with democracy.'*

Nicolas Hulot, the special envoy of the French President to COP21, reminded in his talk to climate pilgrims, who arrived in Paris supporting climate justice at the meeting just before the Paris conference started, that the solution to the climate problem is not possible without revisiting an economic model, which produces such negative effects and creates along with it such deep inequalities as we face. Words, which were repeated in this or that form in several from the political speeches of world leaders presented at the beginning of the conference. It is becoming increasingly clear that the response to climate change will not be possible without redirecting substantial flows of financial resources. Not only those delimited for climate adaptation, but much more substantial amounts directing the whole economy. This, however, will be not possible in the economic system favouring the cheapest and not the most beneficial solutions. While coal and carbon energy resource remain the cheapest energy source, progress in limiting global warming is hardly possible. Recognition of that, however, did not find any significant resonance at the Paris agreement.

It is clear already now that any effective response to climate change will require much more than global political leaders have been ready to admit and prepared to act upon. Even more, it is sad but probably fair and unavoidable to conclude that a just solution to the climate issue with instruments which are at hand, is very likely at the moment to be beyond reach.

Climate change is the defining problem of our time. It might be true what an increasing number of people start to realise more and more, namely that an acceptable solution to this problem is no longer in our minds but in our hearts.

Conclusions

The Paris outcomes include components which allow us to see the text optimistically from a political or even development perspective. Transparency, trust-building, the frame allowing poverty to be address together with climate change by the strengthening of financial transfers and guarantee of continuing economic development experienced by the industrialised world are part of the deal. The long term existential costs are, however, high. Economic and financial paradigm dominating the world imprinted its seal into the text of the agreement. Looking at the outcomes from the long term, scientific and ethical perspective, optimism needs to be curbed. Transformation is according to the treaty not the order of the day. The hope for fixes through traditional approaches and relying on technology, even at that one not yet proved or existing, prevailed. In order to make this approach more trustworthy, it was needed to push aside the notion of necessary transformation and to omit from the text of the treaty ethical terminology such as justice and responsibility, as well as other terms related to scientifically based description of climate reality, such as carbon budget, or the need of decarbonisation.

Politically, the principal building stone of the agreement is the mechanism of voluntary increasingly ambitious targets for cutting national emissions and to report on their progress. The efficiency of voluntary contributions has been experienced on the way to Paris. The proposed INDCs steps were forward-looking, however have been far from sufficient. Therefore there is no realistic reason to expect that this mechanism alone will be sufficient in the future. Actual targets for GHGs emissions, which are as the matter of fact not legally binding, are left for countries to decide for themselves. Even more, in following the treaty provisions, at the moment when the first contributions are expected to be put on the table, the carbon budget for the achieving objective of 1.5C will be very likely mostly over.

As it was stated on several occasions during the Paris conference, as well as many times before, in order to achieve the aim of a maximum temperature increase 1.5 C industrialised countries in being consistent with climate justice should reach zero emissions by 2030. Instead, they continue to invest in new fossil resources. At the current stage there are plans to build over the globe 1200 new coal electric power stations, even if it should not be built any. In spite of that, the agreement does not say a word about the problems of continuing to extract and subsidise fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels is by far the main cause of global warming. To even have a chance of avoiding catastrophic impacts, upwards of 80% of known oil, gas and coal reserves must stay in the ground. And yet, not once does the phrase “fossil fuel” appear in the text. Nor is there any suggestion for removing fossil fuel subsidies which at the current stage amount 5.3 trillion USD/annually. Compared to 100 billion agreed for climate fund gives exactly the image where the priorities are likely to be. An image sadder rather than that one filled with optimism and joy.

In light of that the stated aim to keep global warming below 1.5C cap, while taking into consideration that in 2015 has been reached already more than half of this quota, is more a dream than an expression of a realistic hope. The treaty offers the meaningful aim but does not provide sufficient tools for achieving it, offers words but fails to outline the framework for making these words effective. But this is perhaps the maximum which was possible to achieve at that moment.