

On the road to COP21

The 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21) comes in a context of increased consciousness on the fact that several planetary boundaries actually limit our growth pattern. Some go on to call it the 'last chance' Agreement, and ask for another development model to be adopted, one that is more protective to our planet. There is a strong concern and consensus that these limits were already overcome when it takes to biodiversity loss and the cycle of nitrogen in the atmosphere, while others such as climate change may quickly grow in the coming years[1]. Moreover, 2015 is also the year when humanity prepares for a new set of more general development goals to be adopted, much of which pointing towards environmental protection and the fight against climate change.

More than 1.5 planets are used everyday in order to provide the resources we use and to absorb the waste that we produce. This means that it now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year.

If current population and consumption trends continue, **by 2030 we will need the equivalent of two Earths to support us.**



In our current society, resources are turned into waste way faster than waste can be turned back into resources. This creates a global ecological instability that affects the quality and the quantity of those assets on which human life and biodiversity depend for their survival.

The result is diminishing forest cover, reduced soil fertility, intensive agricultural practices, collapsing fisheries, depletion of fresh water systems, and the build-up of carbon dioxide emissions, which creates problems such as global climate change. These are just a few of the most noticeable effects of the ecological instability that we create.

Additionally, this disequilibrium also contributes to resource conflicts and wars, mass migrations, famine, disease and other human tragedies, which tend to have a disproportionate impact on the poor, who cannot buy their way out of the problem by getting resources from somewhere else.

Our (sustainable) life on this planet is influenced by the assumption of these ecological limits central to our decision-making processes. That is what the successive Conferences of the Parties (COPs) are all about. Or at least what they try to achieve.

From the first UN Climate Change Conference held in 1995 in Berlin, to this year's Conference in Paris, this annual meeting reunites all parties to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, in order to assess progress in dealing with climate change, and try to establish legally binding obligations for developed countries to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The last COP was held last year in Lima, Peru. The main outcome of the Conference at that time was a consensus on the way countries would state their contributions to the Paris 2015 Agreement, as well

as on the role adaptation plays in the fight against climate change.



There is a high pressure on the 21st COP to deliver concrete and effective solutions for fighting **climate change**. More than the political and legal pressure, there is an urgency to take immediate action in order to avoid ending up with a planet that is not liveable anymore. For some, the damage accumulated during all these years is so important, that even a complete, full stop of our activities would not prevent world temperatures to continue rising over the next couple of years. But a significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is essential to avoid the worst scenario, and selfish behaviours are not part of the solution.

The EU clearly stated its priority for the 2015 meeting in Paris: the adoption of a legally binding agreement that is ambitious as possible, and that allows us to keep track to deliver the objective of keeping the temperatures rise below **2°C**. Together with the United States and China, the EU committed to a major greenhouse gas emissions reduction.

Parties to the Convention were invited to come forward with their **intended nationally determined contributions** to the Agreement (INDCs) early 2015, well before the Paris conference. These INDCs represent what countries are ready to do to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The Agreement itself would validate and reiterate these commitments. The success of the Agreement would therefore depend on (1) the number of Parties and in particular of major emitters that come forward with such commitments, (2) the strength of the rules designed to enforce those commitments, the progression in ambition from the pledges made under previous agreements, and (3) the flexibility and commitment of the Parties to further, and periodically review and strengthen their greenhouse gas reduction commitments over time, as scientific claims, economic and technologic development ask for stronger action.

In practice, one can notice **two types of climate change policies**: some which are dealing with **climate change adaptation** (i.e. reducing the intensity of and vulnerability to climate change impacts), while others are dealing with **climate change mitigation** (i.e. reducing the magnitude or the intensity of climate change). Adaptation becomes rather a local responsibility, while mitigation is a more global responsible thing to do. Although these two policies complement each other, financial, human, technical resources, as well as the intensity and urgency of dealing with climate change made these policies follow the global division North-South. While richer countries in the North focus on climate change mitigation, poorer (and usually the most affected) countries in the South focus on climate change adaptation. As it was initially designed, the Paris Agreement would focus only on climate change mitigation efforts. This ignores however the needs and priorities of those that suffer the most from climate change.

Two serious threats could hinder the adoption of an international binding and effective agreement: **(1) international solidarity in the fight against climate change, and (2) transparency and accountability.**

Achieving the 2°C climate change objective is not about autarchic measures. International solidarity should contribute towards a strong agreement that benefits all. In particular, wealthier countries should help countries in need towards increasing their climate resilience and offer them climate-related support.



The EU, as a Party of the Convention, has translated its at least 40% economy-wide GHG domestic reduction target into an INDC. Together with its Member States, the Union provides also technical and financial support to countries in need for drafting their own INDCs. The Union also encouraged the inclusion of an adaptation component within INDCs, which was one of the main concerns of developing countries. In fact, European support towards third countries against climate change already includes support to national climate change adaptation strategies. Existing arrangements under the Convention could however, and should be used to strengthen cooperation and coordination between climate change adaptation and climate change mitigation. International aid should therefore contribute not only to achieving developing countries goals, as set in their INDCs, but also strengthen these countries' resilience against climate change.

Public actors don't bear alone the responsibility and costs of achieving a solid agreement though. They will act as enablers and facilitators for climate resilient investments, development plans and national policies that attract private investors. They will put the basis for investments in technology and infrastructure that allow us to live on a resource-constrained planet. Their action represents just the first step towards the set up of a public demand that enables businesses and policy-makers to participate. In order to achieve a climate resilient society and keeping the increase in temperature under 2°C, the world needs a significant amount of resources. 100 billion dollars per year by 2020 were estimated to be the needs of the world population back in 2009 at the COP in Copenhagen. This amount is however far from the actual flows of development aid against climate change. As an example, the EU contributes around 12 billion dollars out of this amount.

For **developed countries**, engaging in the fight against climate change would also procure self-benefits, apart from the obvious social justice. Avoiding climate migrants and easily spreadable climate related diseases are just some examples.

But the goodwill of some is not enough to ensure that everyone will deliver on their commitments. The seriousness of the efforts must be measured through a standardised procedure. Expectations, possibilities for climate change action should therefore be made clearer through a simple, understandable and predictable accounting system and standard, that is internationally enforced. Introducing fairness in the process will make sure that rules apply to each and every country which is Party of the Convention, in a way that reflects its capability and national circumstances.

Civil society is encouraged to fully participate in the preparatory events for the COP21. Ensuring the same level of knowledge about the importance of climate negotiations among NGOs, local authorities, media, researchers and companies in both developed and developing countries would ideally increase popular pressure for transparent and accountable commitments. Moreover, solutions and actions coming from the civil society could guide decision-makers in formulating their own actions.

The road to Paris was long and fastidious. Some countries went to deny their responsibility for climate change and claimed their "right" to make use of world resources and develop. Indeed, for a long period countries have considered that decreasing their carbon emissions would slow down their development. This mentality is against any agreement to be found in Paris. To put all chances on our side for keeping the planet a liveable place, solidarity and transparency must be the key words to

define the new climate deal. And there is hope for a strong agreement in Paris. Economic and social data now slowly comes to prove that the transition to a low carbon society is not only decisive, but it can also generate prosperity, create new jobs, and improve our health and well-being. New business models were developed, allowing us to make an infinite use of rare resources that would otherwise fill up our landfills, pollute our waters and soils, and deteriorate our human condition. Climate change adaptation is in some cases not seen as a constraint anymore, but as an opportunity to generate growth and create a better way of living. In some countries, for example, protecting ecosystems and coastal areas against erosion has generated economic opportunities, preserved landscapes and livelihoods. Civil society is also more and more mobilised in the fight against climate change. Numerous networks have already shown their support to making the COP21 a successful Conference and have shown their interest in maintaining a strong dialogue before, during and after the official meetings.

[1] Limits to growth, planetary boundaries, developed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, <http://www.stockholmresilience.org/21/research/research-programmes/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

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