From Paris to Implementation: The Role of International Climate Initiatives

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The Paris Agreement: A Major Victory for Sustainable Development

We ended 2015 on an upbeat note for sustainable development. By nearly all accounts,[1] over 190 nations came together to achieve a historic climate agreement that reflects the aspiration, and the seriousness, to preserve our planet for future generations. The ink is still drying on the Paris Agreement, but it is time to assess the key elements that will lead to its successful implementation. Key features include:

- A commitment to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius, while pursuing efforts to limit temperature increase to 1.5 degrees
- An agreement to escalate action by conducting a "global stocktake" every five years (at minimum) and ramping up mitigation activities as needed
- An agreement by developed countries (and some large emerging economies) to continue to provide and mobilize (U.S.) $100 million of climate finance to support developing countries every year until 2025
- A requirement for all countries to regularly report on emissions and track progress on achieving their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) in a multilateral process
- A recognition of the importance of carbon markets, which will allow governments to voluntarily link and cooperate through their use

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These points appear in most post-Paris assessments[2] as key achievements. But does this capture the full picture? Missing from many commentators' reviews is an acknowledgement of the key role played by non-state actors: the private sector, cities, states and regions, and civil society groups. These groups stepped up as never before to make major commitments to mitigate climate change. The We Mean Business Coalition—a collection of like-minded business nongovernmental groups including CDP, the Climate Group, and Business for Social Responsibility—showcases on its website the commitments made to help governments implement the Paris Agreement:[3] 400 businesses, 120 investors, and 150 cities and regions representing 150 million people and (U.S.) $11 trillion. This includes a wide variety of non-state actor commitments, including shifting to 100 percent renewable energy, decarbonizing investment portfolios, using internal carbon pricing, and supporting government pricing policies. Climate action by the private sector, cities, and others will by all estimates deliver the lion's share of the investment needed, leaving public monies to play a catalytic role.[4]

The emissions reduction potential for these sorts of pledges is large—by some estimates, initiatives can deliver annual emissions reductions of 2.5 gigatonnes of CO_2-equivalent (GtCO2e) by 2020, and 5.5 GtCO2e annually by 2030.[5] Even if we acknowledge that there is a large overlap between emissions reductions generated by non-state actors and the national

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pledges made by countries in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), we should not underestimate the political signal and momentum generated by these efforts—they may inspire greater government ambition.[4]

An Increasing Role for International Climate Partnerships

Until recently, climate policy focused on setting global targets accompanied by legally binding commitments from national governments. Since 1992, countries have negotiated within the UNFCCC, resulting in binding targets under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and voluntary pledges following the Copenhagen negotiations in 2008. After Copenhagen, there was a growing frustration by business and other groups at the slow pace, complexity, and lack of a formal way to input into the UNFCCC process. This led to the creation of a number of non-state actor coalitions, platforms, and initiatives, many of which were showcased at the United Nations Secretary-General's Climate Summit in September 2014, which had the stated intent to bring non-state actors into the climate fold as equal partners to national governments.[6]

Non-state action was also supported by Peru and France, who used their successive COP presidencies to create the Lima-Paris Action Agenda (LPAA) as a platform for non-state actors to exert leadership on climate. UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres similarly gave non-state actors a tangible entry point to the climate negotiations by providing a NAZCA (Non-state Actor Zone for Climate Action) organization space inside the COP21 venue with a dedicated website.[7] As a result of these efforts—as well as steps taken by the World Economic Forum, UN agencies, the World Bank Group, and others—we now have over 180 climate initiatives that involve over 20,000 participants.[8]

International climate initiatives include non-state actors making commitments to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions or to take action to bring about emission reductions through policy action. International climate initiatives range from sector-specific (e.g., the Global Alliance for Buildings and Construction,[9] the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative,[10] or the Cement Sustainability Initiative[11]) to multi-sector (e.g., the Science Based Targets Initiative[12] or the Renewable Energy 100[13] effort), to country-specific (e.g., the Low Carbon USA[14] effort) and regional (e.g., the Climate Group's Compact of States and Regions[15]). Initiatives can also involve partnerships with national governments acting outside the UNFCCC or cooperating with non-state actors (e.g., the Carbon Pricing Leadership Coalition[16] and Partnership for Market Readiness[17]).

Taking International Climate Initiatives to the Next Level

It is clear these international climate initiatives will play a key role going forward. In addition to delivering potentially significant GHG emissions reductions,* these sorts of partnerships can help to ratchet up national ambition under the UNFCCC process by increasing stakeholder support for climate mitigation policies and building the evidence base to ease implementation.[19] However, if international climate initiatives are not well-designed and implemented, there is the risk that they will delay more meaningful action by governments by giving a false sense that new and additional emissions reductions are being achieved when they are not.

Some international climate initiatives lack accountability. It is difficult to assess whether participants are meeting their commitments due to a lack of transpar-

*The mitigation potential of various sector-based initiatives was estimated at 17 +/-3 $GtCO_2e$ by 2020, around half of total global CO_2 emissions in 2014.[18]

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ency. Participants make general pledges to share information and create partnerships, without a more rigorous focus on climate results. Related to this, there is no standardized set of monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) procedures for non-state actor commitments, which prevents consistent assessment and review. Further, voluntary actors often choose a variety of start and end years for targets, and use varying levels of ambition in their commitments.[19] For example, cities in the C40 have emissions reductions targets ranging from 16 percent to 100 percent.[20] Another challenge is ensuring that non-state actor pledges are delivering ambition above and beyond the pledges made by countries in their Nationally Determined Contributions to the UNFCCC: One study of 10 major international climate initiatives concluded that only three were clearly delivering reductions additional to national policies; the remaining initiatives had significant overlap with national pledges.[5]

Considering that the bulk of emissions increases will take place in developing countries, the case for involving non-state actors from the developing world is clear.

Another set of challenges exists around stakeholder engagement. It is notable that relatively few of the existing international climate partnerships, initiatives, and platforms provide a space for governments, business, and civil society to work as equals toward a shared climate goal. Of 13 major international climate initiatives studied by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, only one—the Global Methane Initiative—included national governments, business, and international/civil society organizations as equal stakeholders.[5] Further, of the more than 20,000 participants in 184 international climate initiatives cited,[8] only 54 are national governments. There is also a need to diversify the set of non-state actors making voluntary commitments. We see weak representation of companies and subnational governments from Asia and Latin America in international climate initiatives, with nearly negligible participation from actors in Africa. Considering that the bulk of emissions increases will take place in developing countries,[5] the case for involving non-state actors from the developing world is clear.

How can international partnerships and voluntary climate initiatives address these challenges and deliver maximum impact? A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study identified several elements of a well-designed international public–private partnership. These include: securing leadership to create critical mass of supporters for policy change; focusing on results and providing transparency through regular monitoring and reporting; coordinating and sharing information regularly to avoid duplication of effort; and including governments, business, and civil society as equal partners.[21]

It is important to address the transparency gap. Participants in climate initiatives can use existing frameworks for reporting and can establish measurable goals for themselves to track progress. It is promising that some initiatives have started publishing information on the progress of cities and private-sector actors via the CDP Open Data Portal[22] and the carbon*n* Climate Registry.[23] The UNFCCC's NAZCA database could also potentially work with CDP or other service providers to fill the remaining data gaps.

There is also a need to have a more rigorous assessment of additionality. The C40 and the We Mean Business Coalition[24] could work with national governments to ensure that city and company GHG pledges are accurately captured in NDCs. Some commentators suggest a more formal role for non-state actors in the UNFCCC process—for example, the creation of a Global Framework for Climate Action that records international climate initiatives, measures progress, and assesses the complementarity of non-state action with the UNFCCC process.[25]

Finally, in order to address the rapidly growing emissions from emerging economies, international climate initiatives need to make a more concerted effort to include cities, civil society groups, and companies from the Global South. We have begun to see pledges and engagement from businesses in Brazil, India, China, and other regions—for example in the Caring for Climate Initiative of the United Nations Global Compact[26]—but much more work needs to be done. Organizations like CDP, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the Climate Group, and C40 are actively opening offices and forming partnerships with local organizations. This is an excellent start that needs to be expanded as we move from Paris toward implementation.

It is clear that the climate agreement struck in Paris was a truly historic achievement. Now, as countries and negotiators begin to assess how to put this agreement into action, they can be inspired by and benefit from the unprecedented show of leadership and support by non-state actors. With improved transparency, alignment with government policy, and truly global representation, we just may have a chance to keep global warming at or under 1.5 degrees Celsius.

It is clear that the climate agreement struck in Paris was a truly historic achievement.

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