

CLIMATE CHANGE PROGRESS, THE US WITHDRAWAL AND WHAT WE CAN EXPECT FROM COP23

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In light of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (PA) in June 2017, continued political momentum and concrete outcomes at upcoming climate change summits are needed to reinforce global commitment to the PA. From 6–17 November 2017 nearly 200 countries will convene in Bonn, Germany to advance progress on climate change action. The 23rd meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP23) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an important milestone within a much longer negotiating process. COP23 is meant to finalise the technical aspects for the implementation of the PA. Many of the details on implementation modalities, procedures and guidelines to operationalise the PA are yet to be finalised – a process that needs to be concluded by COP24 in November 2018. Negotiating parties need clarity on a number of key issues, including implementation assistance – ie, unlocking climate finance, capacity building and technology transfer. COP23 is also an important stocktaking opportunity to assess the cumulative contributions of national actions.

INTRODUCTION

The PA, which entered into force in November 2016, sets out the overarching goals of and framework for

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** The Africa Group of Negotiators must highlight their pledge to implement the existing Paris Agreement text, and encourage others to remain committed to the process.
- 2** COP23 must maintain a focus on key issues to progress the implementation of the Paris Agreement, such as the provision of \$100 billion in climate finance per year as well as technology transfer and capacity building to developing countries. The Loss and Damage mechanism also needs to be concluded.
- 3** Negotiators must advance the 2018 facilitative dialogue as an important process to assess progress made and further drive ambition, in collaboration with non-state actors.
- 4** The international community must explore ways to strengthen synergies in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement through multi-stakeholder partnerships, most notably the Global Climate Action Agenda.

international climate action post-2020.² By June 2017, 195 members had signed the agreement while 169³ had ratified it – signalling a landmark achievement towards a truly global effort to tackle the climate challenge. Having ratified the PA, countries committed to the decisive actions and policies outlined in their own national climate strategies. These nationally determined contributions (NDCs) lay the foundation for mitigation and adaptation actions and investment pathways towards clean energy, green infrastructure and climate resilience. In 2016 countries finalised these NDCs, embedding them in national legislation and policy.

THE PARIS AGREEMENT: FROM AGREEMENT TO IMPLEMENTATION

Although the PA was signed in 2015 at COP21, the process of working out the details of its operationalisation only began in earnest at COP22. This has continued through 2017 in a series of inter-sessional meetings of the UN, and in numerous processes outside the formal negotiations, including non-party stakeholder meetings.

COP22 in Marrakech intended to galvanise political support and focus on the first steps in agreeing on detailed rules, calling for technical decisions on a wide range of topics, including mitigation, adaptation, finance, transparency, a new ‘global stocktake’ process, market mechanisms, and implementation and compliance. It was an important transitional moment, pivoting from the years of negotiation that produced the PA to a new phase focused on implementation. COP22 thus focused on fleshing out the Paris architecture, delineating areas of convergence and divergence, and adopting a work programme for completing the PA ‘Rule Book’ by 2018. Many of the outcomes were procedural in nature, with parties adopting work plans and groupings for carrying the discussions forward.

COP23, a ‘technical’ COP, will focus on finalising the implementation guidelines of the PA (to be finalised by COP24, and implementable post-2020) and on working towards finalising the pre-2020 action on adaptation and mitigation. Within these negotiating tracks it is important to clarify the details of the PA ‘Rule Book’: who should do what, by when, how and with what financial and other support. This includes how countries should communicate their efforts with regard to mitigation and adaptation, climate finance, transfer of technology and capacity building; how developed countries will be held accountable for their commitments; and how collective

efforts will be reviewed and assessed against the global goals set out in the PA.

At COP21, anticipating that the PA would not be in force for several years, parties decided to conduct an early stocktake through a facilitative dialogue. Countries that have joined the PA are required to report their climate actions transparently, and collectively take stock of progress, starting in 2018. The PA builds on a ratcheting up of aggregate and individual ambition over time, with a view to NDCs’ progressively enhancing ambitions. All parties are requested to submit the next round of new or updated NDCs by 2020, and every five years thereafter, regardless of their respective implementation timeframes.

COP23 must make progress on the design of the facilitative dialogue – considered a politically significant opportunity for taking stock of collective efforts and communicated pledges ahead of 2020.

KEY DISCUSSIONS TO MOVE THE AGENDA FORWARD

As with many other consensus-seeking multilateral negotiations, COP23 negotiators are anticipating some difficult discussions. Clarity is needed on the plan to raise \$100 billion per year in public and private climate finance for developing countries by 2020. According to developing countries, the current pledges from developed countries are insufficient. Questions also remain around the funding difficulties in the UNFCCC and the future of the Adaptation Fund (AF), set to end in 2020. Will the negotiating parties extend the AF’s mandate, or will another mechanism be established that supports small-scale climate adaptation projects through direct access to funding? Although many developed countries prefer channelling support through the Green Climate Fund (GCF), in partnership with accredited intermediary bodies, developing countries want to see the continuation of the AF. Developing countries are calling for mechanisms to enable faster, more direct and more effective access to and delivery of climate finance, through simplified access procedures and the provision of readiness support and capacity building. Developing countries also hope for balanced finance to support their mitigation and adaptation activities, including increased engagement by the private sector.

COP23 takes place within a complex global geopolitical landscape, exacerbated by entrenched national interests and contention around the varying levels of differentiation,

vulnerability and requisite obligations. In June this year, President Donald Trump announced the US' withdrawal from the PA. Given that the US is the world's second biggest producer of greenhouse gases (GHGs) after China, its abdication of responsibility to reduce GHG emissions is likely to make these and other international negotiations more challenging, particularly with respect to trade and economic competitiveness.

According to the Brookings Institute⁴ the US' decision has galvanised global commitment to the goals of climate stabilisation and to the PA in two ways.

- The international coalition forged to deliver Paris has strengthened. Immediately after the withdrawal, the other G7 countries, the G20, the EU, China and India all issued strong statements on their continuing commitment to the targets.
- There has been a broad-based domestic response in support of the PA, with states, cities, businesses and other entities in the US attempting to take independent steps to reduce GHG emissions. Former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg has called for a coalition approach to deliver on the national climate target for 2025. Supporting this, a group of 13 states, led by California, Washington and New York, has established the US Climate Alliance to support the achievement of the US national target of 26–28% below 2005 emission levels by 2025.⁵ However, this will be difficult to achieve without federal regulatory or legislative action.

The withdrawal of the US seems to have clarified both the stakes and the global commitment to the process set out under the PA. There is now space for new leadership from important developing countries such as China, as well as from those most vulnerable to climate change. Those countries that bear the brunt of the impacts of climate change must step up and drive the agenda to protect their vulnerable communities.

Fiji, as chair of COP23, must focus on maintaining momentum and ensuring that commitments are delivered under the existing PA. Many countries, including South Africa, have highlighted their intention to continue working on the details of the existing text and not to re-negotiate it, regardless of the US' withdrawal.

PROMOTING A 'GRAND' COALITION FOR CLIMATE ACTION

Recognising that national governments alone cannot

perform all the actions required to achieve international climate objectives and the Sustainable Development Goals, voluntary coalitions and partnerships have emerged since COP21 that include a number of non-party climate champions. The private sector, cities, sub-national governments, regions, indigenous and local communities, and civil society, in partnership with state actors, are key catalysts in the UNFCCC-promoted Global Climate Action Agenda. These stakeholders play an increasingly important part in mobilising and galvanising climate action on the ground and in introducing new initiatives for scaled-up, high-impact solutions. According to the UN Climate Change Secretariat, 'more than 70 initiatives, involving almost 10,000 players from 180 countries, 7,000 local authorities and 2,000 businesses have committed to undertake transformational action in the key economic and social sectors and areas'.⁶ Initiatives include the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, the Transformative Actions Program managed by Local Governments for Sustainability, and the Under2 Coalition of sub-national governments.⁷

COP23 will seek to harness synergies in the implementation of the agendas on climate change and sustainable development, and look for opportunities to accelerate concrete and integrated action across collaborative partnerships.

FIJI'S AGENDA AS CHAIR OF COP23

As the first small island developing country to host the negotiations, Fiji will represent the voices of the most vulnerable low-lying coastal and island states. Being on the frontline of climate change and the early warning system for the global community, Fiji, along with its alliances among the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and vulnerable coastal African countries, is pushing for the completion of the five-year work plan of the 2013 Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage. This mechanism aims to assist vulnerable countries with the unavoidable impacts of climate change such as extreme weather events, the slow onset of sea-level rise or the spread of desertification.

Over a quarter of the NDCs, mostly from the SIDS and LDCs, make explicit reference to loss and damage. They seek clarity on the mobilisation of predictable funding to support both economic and non-economic losses associated with these impacts and climate risk management. This is contested terrain, as developing

countries want an independent policy track within the UNFCCC on loss and damage, separate from adaptation. In contrast, developed countries have sought to limit the discussion of liability and compensation, framing loss and damage as a matter of adaptation and/or risk reduction and insurance. Coincidentally, these discussions take place against a backdrop of a distressing period of extreme weather events: severe fires in California, Portugal and Spain; flooding in Nigeria, India, Sierra Leone and Bangladesh; droughts in Ethiopia; dramatic Arctic melt; ice breaking off the continent of the Antarctic; and devastating hurricanes in the Caribbean and the southern US.

Ocean governance will also be a prominent theme throughout COP23. Discussions will address the adverse threats that impair the oceans' role as a climate regulator and an oxygen generator, and that decrease their ability to absorb and store carbon. Among other important themes, deliberations will continue on actions to reduce marine pollution, to make networks of marine protected spaces more effective and to halt the degradation of key ecosystems. Africa's 30 500km coastline is already experiencing the negative impacts of climate change affecting important industries such as fisheries, aquaculture and coastal tourism. Frank Bainimarama, Fijian Prime Minister and incoming COP president, is looking to promote the Oceans Pathway Partnership, thereby bringing action on healthier oceans into the UN climate change process by 2020. Fiji recognises the need for enhanced synergies on climate change and disaster risk through the joint implementation of the PA, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, as well as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification and relevant UN strategies.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the climate change commitments made under the landmark PA in 2015, and the progress made during COP22 and in other forums, there is still a significant gap between political ambition and practical reality – especially in light of the overall aim of keeping the average rise in global temperature to below 2°C compared to pre-industrial levels. COP23, and the period leading up to COP24 in 2018, is critical in laying a foundation for the implementation of the PA and making sure that the necessary tools are in place to facilitate the delivery of these commitments. COP23 is an opportune time to take stock of the implementation of the PA and to assess the collective progress made towards achieving

its long-term goals. The delivery of pre-2020 actions is also important to maintain momentum and trust among negotiating bodies, with international efforts matched by countries' continued progress in delivering on their national climate plans. Key to this process and the success of these negotiations is the inclusion of non-state actors as real implementing partners.

The strong support for the PA from non-federal US actors, sub-national entities, the private sector and the international community at large is an important indication of global commitment to the momentum that has been generated over recent years. The main challenge is to sustain the cycle of positive action, for countries to maintain their engagement with the process, and to keep open a pathway for the US to re-enter the process at a future date. The strong participation from leaders of the developing world underscores the dramatic shift that the Paris process has initiated in the overall global conversations on climate change and sustainable development more broadly.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Romy Chevallier is a Senior Researcher with the Governance of Africa's Resources Programme at SAIIA. She holds an MA in International Relations from the University of the Witwatersrand.
- 2 Work at COP23 will also focus on finalising the pre-2020 action on adaptation and mitigation.
- 3 See http://unfccc.int/paris_agreement/items/9444.php, accessed 10 November 2017
- 4 Hultman N, 'The galvanized world response to Trump's Paris Agreement decision', PlanetPolicy, Brookings, 7 June 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/planetpolicy/2017/06/07/the-galvanized-world-response-to-trumps-paris-agreement-decision/>, 10 November 2017.
- 5 Robertson M, "America's pledge": can states and cities really address climate change?, *The Atlantic*, 2 June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/06/can-states-and-cities-really-commit-to-the-paris-agreement/528945/>, 10 November 2017.
- 6 UN Climate Change Secretariat, 'Climate Action Now: Summary for Policymakers', 2016, <https://cop23.com/fj/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/UNFCCC-Climate-Action-Now-Summary-for-Policymakers-2016.pdf>, 10 November 2017.
- 7 The coalition includes 187 jurisdictions on six continents. While most Under2 Coalition members represent sub-national jurisdictions, a total of 15 countries are part of the global pact.

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