

Where We Are at with Climate Change

Abstract Copenhagen, Cancun, Durban, Doha, Warsaw, Lima and Paris climate change summits are now lost in obscurity such was their impact. Save for two—Copenhagen and Paris. Copenhagen set out basic requirements for global action, yet it took a further six years of glacial negotiation before the basics could be agreed in Paris. Poor countries are concerned that money promised to them still will not be nearly enough to protect them. Not all of the agreement is legally binding, so future governments could yet renege on their commitments. In fact, the only legally binding part was that countries should report on their progress at a meeting in five years. This section looks at the reality of the climate change summits and what they really mean.

Keywords Climate Change · Summit · UNFCCC · COP

While it is still difficult to link, conclusively, any single big weather event to global warming, for several years climate scientists all over the world have been warning about the risk of extreme weather (deluges of rain, flooding, heatwaves, cold and so on). So why are we surprised when each event, wherever one is in the world, seems to take the population and its government unawares. Why are we surprised each time it happens? Has no one figured out that these so-called one-in-a-hundred-year events are actually occurring rather frequently? Is no one noticing this?

We pay those who advise government to advise, and we elect those in office to make appropriate decisions and to take action based on that advice. Either those who are supposed to advise are not up to it or will not, or those who are supposed to make decisions are unable to or will not. Which is it? Or, could it be a blend of both?

Perhaps, there are some clues in the climate change summits that occur annually. The summit names, Copenhagen, Cancun, Durban, Doha, Warsaw, Lima and Paris (based on the hosting cities), are now lost in obscurity such was their impact. Save for two—Copenhagen and Paris.

Copenhagen set out the basic requirements for global action, yet it took a further six years of glacial negotiation before the basics could be agreed in Paris. Interestingly, at each of the intervening summits, so-called last-minute deals were struck to save the day. In fact, they did not save anyone's day they just saved a bit of face. The one in Durban was particularly unedifying. It came down to an eleventh hour face-to-face with two negotiators (from European Union and India) squaring off against each other surrounded by a sea of onlookers.¹ It smacked of watching two playground bullies testing each other out. It was terrible theatre and culminated in a worthless set of agreements that at the time were hailed as historic.

And that is one of the critical issues.

Why do so many nominally well-educated men and women spend a couple of weeks each year getting really nowhere and yet to a person greet the outcome as a heroic achievement? Why do these people let the world down so badly? Largely, because they are answerable to no one other than themselves.

It all smacks of the Emperor's new clothes, and no one seems to have the wit, courage or insight to break ranks and come clean. Consequently, much of the climate change summitry has been a circus.

After Copenhagen, we had the *Copenhagen Accord*: American officials spun the deal as a "*meaningful agreement*",² and the British prime minister of the day hailed it as "*a success on five out of six measures*".³ Really?

After Cancún, we had the *Cancún Agreements*: the negotiator from Bangladesh⁴ addressed the plenary and praised the Mexican presidency of the talks for having "*restored the faith of all the parties*" and hailed the *Cancún Agreement* as a "*great compromise*". Really?

After Durban, we had the *Durban Platform*: negotiations at the UN climate conference in Durban (December 2011) ended with 195 countries pledging to negotiate a new international climate treaty by 2015. Pledging to do something in four years' time is not much different

to fiddling while Rome burns (especially when we know now what the real outcome was in 2015). The *Durban Platform* also formally provided for a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol and the launch of the Green Climate Fund to distribute the US\$100 billion in assistance pledged by developed nations to assist developing nations with mitigation efforts. The EU representatives applauded the *Durban Platform* as an “*historic breakthrough*” in the fight against climate change⁵....Really? Five years on the Fund is understaffed and buffeted by politics and is still struggling to define itself, with barely 10 billion in its pocket. Yet, it was to transfer 100 billion by 2020. Consequently, it seems to just wave through any old proposal, such as solar panels in Chile where some suppliers already give away the energy produced; it is so abundant.

As an aside, South Africa produces nearly half of the continent’s greenhouse gas emissions and only just managed to produce a *First National Climate Change Response* before the conference which was strong on intent and rather thin on substance at the same time as the country was drawing up a strategic electricity plan based largely on fossil fuels. Hardly leadership from the host country.

And therein lies a global truth, many countries have used legislation and fiscal governance to effect improvement and to change industry practice, yet it is still not enough. While a common exhortation is for the private sector to take some ownership and we should not rely solely on governments, what we find is that the private sector does the minimum necessary. Their *raison d’être* is not to save the world but to turn a reasonable profit to ensure their own sustainability. If there is one thing that a business *does understand* is what *their sustainability* depends upon. And that is not necessarily what the world as a whole needs.

After Doha, we had the *Doha Amendment*: (to the Kyoto Protocol) featuring a second commitment period (to reduce emissions) running from 2012 until 2020 and limited in scope to 15% of the global carbon dioxide emissions due to the lack of commitment by Belarus, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Ukraine and the USA. Also, developing countries such as Brazil, China (the world’s largest emitter) and India were not included since they were not subject to emissions reductions under the Kyoto Protocol anyway. The conference made little progress towards the funding of the Green Climate Fund. More fiddling...

After Warsaw, we had the *Warsaw Outcomes* when governments took further essential decisions to stay on track towards securing a universal climate change agreement in 2015. How much more fiddling is there to do? (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Earnest Summit folk in Peru

After Lima, we had the *Lima Call for Climate Action*: the Secretary General of the United Nations hailed the outcome and praised delegates for setting the groundwork for a more conclusive agreement⁶ to be reached in 2015 having brought together the 195 Parties to the UNFCCC in an attempt to hammer out a new universal treaty which would enter force by 2020. The EU purred that this climate change conference would pave the way for the adoption of a new, legally binding, global climate agreement in Paris 2015. Fast forward to Paris.

After Paris, the agreement was hailed as “*historic, durable and ambitious*”.⁷ Developed and developing countries alike are required to limit their emissions to relatively safe levels, of 2 °C with an aspiration of 1.5 °C, with regular reviews to ensure these commitments can be increased in line with scientific advice. Finance will be provided to poor nations to help them cut emissions and cope with the effects of extreme weather. Countries affected by climate-related disasters will gain urgent aid. Wonderful.

But take a closer look, the caps on emissions are still too loose, likely to lead to warming of 2.7–3 °C above pre-industrial levels, breaching the 2 °C threshold that scientists say is the limit of safety, beyond which the effects—droughts, floods, heatwaves and sea level rises—are likely to become catastrophic and irreversible. Poor countries are also concerned that the money provided to them will not be nearly enough to protect them. Not all of the agreement is legally binding, so future governments of the signatory countries could yet renege on their commitments. In fact, the only legally binding part was that countries should report on their progress at a meeting in five years.

To be legally bound to turn up to a meeting in 2020 to make a report, is that it? Some achievement. Yet, as the news spread around the world, the reaction from civil society groups, governments and businesses, was overwhelmingly positive. These people do not serve humanity well (Fig. 2).

Interestingly, even though negotiators were content to work with a 2 °C threshold, an expert meeting had been convened in Oxford by the UK Meteorological Office to plan for a 4 °C world. That meeting was more than five years ago. That is the difference between political expediency and a technological reality.

The next and most recent summit was in Marrakesh (2016) and called for a road map to put the promises of the *Paris Agreement* into action. For the climate vulnerable in the poorest countries, this means



Fig. 2 We choose to see, or not, Marshall Islands

support to adapt and build resilience to the impacts of climate change. Many are concerned that although there are various pots of international and national climate finance available, money is not reaching the local level. There is a recognition that national governments are unable or unwilling, or both, to deal with the consequences of climate change. The response now is to channel funds to the local level. There is a basic assumption that local people with their first-hand experience and relevant knowledge of how to manage the shocks and stresses of previous years are the appropriate ones to deal with climate change into the future.

The challenges of climate change in the most affected countries are not going to be dealt with by tweaking agriculture (so-called smart agriculture) or flood defences or setting up insurance schemes or similar small activities. Some countries such as Kenya, Mali, Senegal and Tanzania are using existing devolved government structures to access different sources of climate finance and getting it into the hands of local governments. Since some local governments have not been able to deal with the most

basic of human needs such as clean water, sanitation, health and education, why should we assume they could deal with one of the largest challenges to humanity? The most vulnerable need to be helped, not be given funds and hope they can do what is necessary.

Developed countries have committed to more than US\$ 100 billion of climate finance reaching developing countries each year by 2020. This is simply not happening. But the answer is not to give it to local governments which barely have functioning offices, may be a computer hogged by the boss, and often no vehicles. Some even argue that although governments may have expectations on how to build climate change resilience, these may not be the same as needs identified by the community and prefer communities to decide what is important for them as far as resilience is concerned and then the government supports what the community decides. This makes no sense.

Examples are cited in sub-Saharan Africa where areas in arid and semi-arid areas are affected by drought almost each year. Yet, these areas do not have the basic infrastructure development in the first place. This basic stuff should be fixed first as that is a fundamental of future resilience, for instance, barrages to retain seasonal water, and well-constructed markets with the means to access them (roads that work during the rainy seasons) and early warning systems. Basic institutional strengthening at national and local level is critical with, of course, treasury not project support. This basic institutional development needs to be based on a professional, career-structured civil service to retain skills, knowledge and experience.

The summit concluded with the countries agreeing the *Marrakech Action Proclamation*. This was a political statement of support for urgent action by governments, business and civil society, in the same vein since the 2009 *Copenhagen Accord*. This time the countries reaffirmed their commitment to the *Paris Agreement* and pledged to finalise the rules by 2018. The meeting had been managed to lower expectations for progress in the formal negotiation of the rules for the *Paris Agreement*. It was agreed to continue work to develop the rules with the aim of finalising them by their meeting in 2018 (at COP 24). This is the same date that the IPCC is anticipated to publish its analysis of pathways to 1.5 °C. In essence, countries are only just starting to get to grips with the technical detail and practical aspects of what they agreed in Paris back in 2015.

NOTES

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-62150-0>

Building Global Resilience in the Aftermath of
Sustainable Development

Planet, People and Politics

Pagett, R.

2018, XIV, 167 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-62150-0