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The Paris climate change summit in a nutshell

What is happening in Paris?

On 30 November, Heads of State and Government will meet in Paris to launch a crucial fortnight of talks on climate change, also known as COP21[1]. After the first day, these leaders will then leave negotiators from around 190 countries to continue talks, hoping to iron out a deal by 11 December (by when most ministers will also have arrived).

How did we get here?

The Paris summit is the latest staging post in a process that began in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, where governments adopted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). In it, they agreed to constrain greenhouse gas emissions to prevent "dangerous" climate change; rich countries agreed that they must lead, and help poorer countries financially and technically.

The Kyoto Protocol, agreed in 1997, saw developed countries accept firm, legally binding targets for cutting emissions. At the Bali summit in 2007, governments agreed to finalise a new deal encompassing emission restrictions for all countries within two years. But Copenhagen in 2009 turned sour. The following year, in Cancun, governments agreed to limit global warming since pre-industrial times to 2 Celsius, as a convenient definition of "dangerous" climate change. In Durban in 2011, governments again agreed to finalise a new global deal, this time by 2015; so, this deal is what is supposed to happen in Paris.

What is currently up for negotiation?

There are several key components of any agreement in Paris:

- Most countries have already announced unilateral pledges for **constraining emissions**, mainly with a 2030 end-date, known as Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs); these are not really up for discussion.

- The INDCs combined are not enough to meet the 2C target. So the deal should contain some mechanism for **reviewing** pledges and **ratcheting** up emission-cutting ambition[2].

- What form a **long term goal** for greenhouse gas reduction could take. Meeting the 2°C target ultimately means virtually eliminating fossil fuel use (unless technology is used to capture and store emissions) within decades. Some governments have reservations.

- **Climate finance** – how much developed countries will pay, and how they will raise the money, to help developing countries adapt to climate impacts and reduce emissions. Before Copenhagen, developed countries promised to ensure that $100bn per year is raised by 2020, but sums so far are less than that.

- **Loss and damage** – how poor nations will be compensated for damages from climate change that are inevitable due to past emissions from countries that industrialised early. This is controversial with countries such as the US that could be liable.

- **Monitoring, reporting and verification** – how governments can be sure that other countries are doing what they promised in terms of restricting emissions.

Will there be a repeat of the disaster in Copenhagen in 2009?

Unlikely. There has been a significant shift in understanding of the scale of the climate challenge by scientists, politicians and the public. For the first time ever, we have a genuinely global effort in place. Over 160 countries have so far submitted INDCs[3], covering almost 90% of global emissions.

China and the US – accounting for over a third of emissions – are in a very different place from 2009[4]. The world is also beginning to decouple economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions; last year, for the first time, the global economy grew but emissions did not. Coal use in China and other countries is falling, and renewable energy is growing spectacularly and becoming much cheaper. In 2009 renewables were just establishing themselves as a source of power but they are now the world's second largest source of electricity[5]. And climate impacts have become more measurable and visible.

Will the summit do what's needed to stop climate change?

Countries' emission reduction commitments are, once summed up, insufficient to meet the 2°C target. Rather, they would put us on course for about 2.7°C. This means some climate impacts are likely to become irreversible and perhaps catastrophic. In addition, it is unlikely that sufficient finance will be committed to the poorest nations to protect them against climate impacts.

What happens after Paris?

Public pressure for action on climate change is increasing, with polls indicating 70-80% support globally for curbing carbon emissions. The moral case for acting on climate change has been made more strongly than ever by the Pope and leaders of many other religions. This will increase pressure on governments to act and increase their ambition. A Paris deal would send a powerful message that governments are serious about curbing climate change. This is likely to swing investment to low-carbon solutions more rapidly, which will make it easier for governments to increase ambition over time and eventually make cuts deep enough to keep global warming to 2°C.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

[1] The 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), also known as COP21.

[2] The UN's Green Climate Fund, which is supposed to become the main mechanism for receiving and distributing the $100bn per year, reached a goal of having $10bn committed by the end of 2014. A recent OECD report found that developed countries are on track to provide this cash (see: http://www.oecd.org/env/cc/oecd-cpi-climate-finance-report.htm), but this is contested by some countries. There is currently no mechanism in place for raising that to the $100bn per year figure.

[3] More information on INDCs can be found on the following websites:
- World Resources Institute website: http://cait.wri.org/indc/
- Climate Action Tracker, independent scientific analysis produced by four research organisations: http://climateactiontracker.org

[4] The US has now embraced the role of international climate leader, as reflected in its Clean Power Plan: http://www2.epa.gov/cleanpowerplan/clean-power-plan-existing-power-plants. China has announced it will reduce the carbon intensity of its economy and peak carbon emissions by 2030 or sooner (many say it could happen faster). The two countries have also signed a deal to work together to cut carbon dioxide emissions: http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/12/china-and-us-make-carbon-pledge

[5] According to the International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook 2015: http://www.businessgreen.com/bg/news/2434056/iea-renewables-to-overtake-coal-as-worlds-largest-power-source

Paris is hosting COP21. Image: David Meenah, Creative Commons License