



**HOME  
LESS**

**JEN**

**KIMUSCHT**

# AFTER THE PARIS AGREEMENT

How the Global Climate Movement Is Holding Governments Accountable

*By Hoda Baraka and Payal Parekh*

**T**he Paris Agreement reached in December 2015 is a milestone in the struggle to address the threat from climate change. All but two of the 197 parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change agreed for the first time to undertake efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects. The agreement enters into force in late 2016, having been ratified by at least fifty-five parties who collectively account for at least 55 percent of global greenhouse emissions.

To climate justice activists across the world, the Paris Agreement hardly represents the end of their struggle for a livable planet. Rather, it marks the beginning of a new phase. For the past twenty-one years, world governments have been meeting to discuss the perils of climate change and what to do about it. In December 1997, the Kyoto Protocol required thirty-seven industrialized countries and the European Union to reduce emissions in aggregate by 5 percent relative to 1990 levels. It took until 2005 for the agreement to come into effect. The lag in this process was a testament to how little political will there was to address the issue of climate change, certainly the most egregious case of the tragedy of the commons. Since then, the threat from climate change has advanced at a shocking pace, and with political momentum continuing to lag behind, it has been up to the climate movement to save our planet.

There are glaring examples of the lack of political will. The United States, historically the world's biggest polluter, never ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Canada did so, but in 2011 decided to withdraw when it realized it would not meet its emissions target due to the extraction of the tar sands in western Canada. There were no adverse consequences for Canada's reversal; in fact, Ottawa was able to recuse itself of \$14 billion in penalties it would have had to pay for not meeting its commitments.

◁ Environmentalists demonstrating during the United Nations Climate Change Conference, Paris, Dec. 12, 2015. *Mal Langsdon/Reuters*

This trend continued in Copenhagen in 2009, when many hoped for a new agreement to go beyond the Kyoto Protocol. Governments failed to reach an agreement due to a deep fault line between developed and developing countries. Developed countries, who had used up most of the carbon space, demanded that limits be placed on developing countries' current and future emissions. But the developed countries made the demand while refusing to provide the technology transfer or required financing in order to create an alternative development pathway for developing countries.

In the lead-up to the Paris summit, expectations had been lowered. The United Nations, national governments, and civil society were determined to learn from the mistakes of 2009 so as to avoid walking out empty handed. Unfortunately, precious time had been lost. Global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions had increased by 28 percent in the twelve years between Kyoto and Copenhagen, making a steeper and more costly decline in fossil fuel emissions necessary. By the time world leaders arrived in Paris last year, the severe effects of climate change on flora and fauna, and on the world's most vulnerable populations (the least responsible for causing the climate crisis), had become the new normal.

Climate change is causing suffering and death, threatening species and cultures. The year 2016 will turn out to be the warmest on record, surpassing the previous records set in 2014 and again in 2015. Globally, one-third of amphibian species are threatened with extinction. Almost 30 percent of the Great Barrier Reef's coral has died due to coral bleaching induced by climate change. In East Africa, the worst drought in living memory is affecting more than ten million people and threatening livelihoods in pastoral communities in regions like Somaliland; the drought is known as *mulia*, meaning "that which erases everything on the ground."

The Paris Agreement is an important development in spite of the valuable time wasted and the limits to its terms and financing. It calls for keeping the warming of the planet limited to 2 degrees Celsius relative to pre-industrial temperatures, and if possible, to go below 1.5 degrees Celsius (though it is important to note that we have already crossed the 1 degree Celsius threshold for the first time), aiming for emissions to peak as soon as possible with a steep decline required thereafter. This will require the biggest polluters—the United States, Russia, China, India, Brazil, Canada, Indonesia, and Australia together generate more than half the world's greenhouse gas emissions—to drive down the carbon pollution that contributes to global warming. A separate deal calls for at least \$100 billion per year in funding between 2020 and 2025 to help developing countries adapt to the extreme effects of climate change and utilize cleaner fuel alternatives in economic growth.

A clear weakness in the Paris Agreement is the lack of a binding enforcement mechanism to measure and control CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. While the accord sets overall temperature and financial targets, each country is left to decide on good faith how much it

wants to do. There is no requirement to further reduce emissions in order to meet the targets, if the numbers do not add up. And currently the numbers do not add up; we can expect that the average global temperature will have risen by a median of 2.7 to 3.5 degrees Celsius by 2100 if countries actually fulfill their current pledges. As the American environmentalist and 350.org co-founder Bill McKibben observed, an agreement like this adopted at the first climate conference in 1995 might have worked. Now it gives us a lifeline, but only if governments take seriously the implications of the ambitious goals they have set—the need to reduce carbon emissions drastically and quickly.

According to research by Christophe McGlade and Paul Elkins published in the journal *Nature* in 2015, one-third of oil reserves, half of gas reserves, and more than 80 percent of current coal reserves need to stay in the ground if global temperature rise has an even chance of staying below 2 degrees Celsius. Yet the trend toward continued fossil fuel dependency doesn't look good. If nineteen proposed gas pipelines are built in the eastern United States, then America will fail to meet its proposed target of a 12-19 percent reduction of emissions relative to 1990 levels. Mary Robinson, the former Irish president and Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Climate Change, has publicly chastised the United Kingdom and Germany for not honoring their Paris commitments: Britain has provided tax and oil breaks, while reducing support for energy efficiency and renewables; Germany is providing subsidies to coal producers, while simultaneously committing to a coal phase-out.

There is also reason to question the pledge of financial support for developing countries. The 2016 Finance Adaptation Report of the United Nations Environment Programme estimates that \$140-300 billion could be needed by 2030 and up to \$500 billion by 2050. In 2014, only \$23 billion was pledged for adaptation. Moreover, the longer it takes for emissions to come down, the higher the costs of adaptation due to increasingly extreme effects of climate change. The UNEP report criticizes the Paris summit for not identifying funding sources for the \$100 billion, and warns that unless new and additional finance is made available for adaptation there will be a significant funding gap. While the \$100 billion pledge is a welcome step, UNEP suggests that it is not clear where that money is coming from, and it will not be a sufficient amount in any case.

### **Power to the People**

The adoption of the Paris Agreement presents environmentalists with an important challenge and opportunity. It is an additional tool for holding governments accountable to the goals that they set, and countering the powerful influence of the fossil fuel industry. The global climate movement has been growing in size, becoming better organized, and clocking up achievements. President Barack Obama rejected the Keystone XL pipeline, which was intended to carry oil from western Canada to refineries

in the United States. In Oakland, the city council voted unanimously to ban the storage and handling of coal and petroleum coke in the city. Mounting pressure forced Shell to close its Arctic drilling operations. In Brazil, sixty-one municipalities banned fracking; Brazil's federal court prohibited the use of hydraulic fracturing technology to extract fossil fuels in five states. The people of Negros in the Philippines blocked a proposed 50 megawatt coal-fired power station.

The strategy of climate activists includes exposing and stigmatizing the fossil fuel industry. Like the tobacco industry's denials of the harmful health effects of smoking, the energy industry has known about the threat of climate change for more than forty years but sought to deceive the public in order to protect profits. Last May, some thirty-thousand people took part in Break Free protests targeting fossil fuel extraction projects on six continents. Thirty-five hundred protesters shut down a lignite mine and nearby power station for over forty-eight hours in Germany. In Australia, protesters halted \$20 million worth of coal shipments from the world's largest coal port. Ten thousand campaigners marched against a proposed coal plant in Batangas, the Philippines.

Throughout the world, more than five hundred institutions holding assets of \$3.4 trillion have committed to divest holdings in fossil fuel companies. The divestment campaign draws inspiration from the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s. It began a few years ago when student activists in the United States began calling on their university boards to divest holdings in fossil fuel companies with the argument that if it is wrong to wreck the planet, then it is wrong to profit from it. The argument was that universities are institutions tasked with educating the next generation; affiliating with fossil fuel companies who are actively destroying the future of students is contradictory and morally wrong.

Since then, the movement to divest from fossil fuels has spread to other universities as well as foundations, sovereign wealth funds, museums, and other institutions across the globe. Educational institutions committed to full divestment include the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, University of Glasgow, University of Sheffield, Newcastle University, Stockholm University, and the New School in New York. More than fifty cities have also joined the divestment campaign, including major capitals in Europe such as Paris, Berlin, Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Oslo. Even the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund, the largest sovereign wealth fund whose source of funding comes from royalties paid from offshore oil and gas fields, has committed to divesting from coal companies.

Other campaigners are working to shift government subsidies from the fossil fuel industry to the renewable energy sector. The fossil fuel industry receives global subsidies totaling \$1.9 trillion worldwide, the equivalent of 2.5 percent of global gross domestic product, or 8 percent of government revenues, while estimates for renewable

subsidies top out at a comparably measly \$88 billion dollars globally. If these resources were shifted away from the fossil fuel industry, the world would finally see an end to unsustainable energy systems in favor of an already booming renewable energy sector.

The global climate movement is also campaigning for development banks such as the World Bank and regional multilateral development banks to shift funding from fossil fuel infrastructure projects to renewables projects. The World Bank already advocates decentralized renewable energy, rather than centralized fossil fuel energy, for the 900 million people who live in remote areas with no access to energy. If the development banks see that the age of the fossil fuels is coming to an end, they should seize the opportunity for developing countries to leapfrog fossil fuels and get the majority of their energy from the dawning age of renewables.

For the global climate movement, the fight against climate change is a chance to connect with the workers movement and the anti-poverty movement to build a future that ensures access to sustainable energy for all with livelihoods that don't destroy workers' health or undermine their rights. This is why the climate movement is working to articulate a just transition with other movements that incorporates clean jobs, as well as affordable access to clean energy based on renewable energy. It is a terrible irony that some of the world's poor who have little to no access to modern energy are displaced by coal mines, which neither provide them with jobs (which often go to workers shipped in from other regions) nor electricity.

Everyone on the planet is affected by climate change. But those who are most affected have done the least to create the problem. While 79 percent of historical CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have been caused by developed countries (the United States alone is responsible for 22 percent of historical emissions from 1850–2011), the most vulnerable countries in the world are in Africa, followed by Asia and the Pacific Islands. Most of these countries record the least per capita consumption of fossil fuels on the planet as well as some of the lowest standards of living. In order to ensure that the most vulnerable countries have access to funds to address the effects of climate change, some campaigners are demanding a carbon levy on fossil fuel extraction. There is also a drive to hold polluters to account through litigation, similar to the legal moves against the American tobacco industry in the 1980s.

Climate change is one of the greatest threats that humanity has ever faced, but it also presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shift how our economies function to be more just and equitable for all. The Paris Agreement, while weak on enforcement and financing, sets out clear goals that give us a chance of keeping the planet habitable (albeit altered) for flora, fauna, and humans. The global cadre of climate activists will continue to hold governments to their agreements. It will also continue to build the power of a movement that is the hope for a livable planet.