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Walk the climate talk

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The 2015 Paris Climate Conference from November 30 to December 11 is a landmark in the history of environmental multilateralism that can lay a stepping stone for collective efforts to save planet earth

The 2015 Paris Climate Conference from November 30 to December 11 is a landmark in the history of environmental multilateralism that can lay a stepping stone for collective efforts to save planet earth. With nearly

150 heads of government and state participating, it is a gigantic diplomatic endeavour to mitigate and manage climatic disaster as average temperatures surge and extreme weather patterns get deadlier and more frequent.

The six-year-long buildup to the 21st session of the Conference of Parties (COP21) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been exhausting. The very word “Paris” has become a byword for a most-anticipated moment when the comity of nations would eschew narrow-mindedness and agree on a global governance regime to limit carbon emissions and pave the way for green economic growth.

The good news is that, thanks to major tectonic shifts, Paris will be more successful than the previous high-profile climate summit at Copenhagen in 2009.

Firstly, international opinion has tilted ever more overwhelmingly towards accepting scientific consensus that anthropogenic activity is the main cause for climatic disturbances and that we can ill-afford delaying the response to this challenge. With climate sceptics marginalised in the debate, Paris is on a strong wicket when it comes to common will and shared urgency for something to be done to arrest the worsening climate.

The second factor working in favour of a final agreement in Paris is that the world’s two largest polluters, the United States of America and China, are jointly convinced that “climate change is one of the greatest threats facing humanity and that their two countries have a critical role to play in addressing it.” Buffeted by natural calamities and rising pressure from their societies to act, both Washington and Beijing have announced time-bound carbon emission decreases and are pushing for a deal in Paris.

Thirdly, the very character of the Paris agreement is different from what was attempted at Copenhagen: 183 countries have already submitted voluntarily decided plans on how much emissions they can cut respectively and other steps they would take to reduce their carbon footprint to meet the macro target of preventing the temperature from rising above two degrees Celsius from pre-industrial levels.

These commitments (labelled as Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs) are neither eye-popping nor legally binding. They are aspirational and nations which do not meet them are unlikely to face serious sanctions. Such looseness and flexibility mean that signing on to a final agreement in Paris is diplomatically easier than if there were a top-down mechanism wherein countries would be held accountable and fined for underachieving on green promises.

The host country to COP21, France, has asserted that it is “obvious that a deal would be binding” and that China has also consented to a monitoring system to inspect how sincerely individual signatories to the Paris deal would implement their vows to cut carbon. However, this has been contradicted by the US and is also not palatable to governments of most developing countries.

Although environmental activists are advocating for a far-reaching and enforceable agreement so that Paris is more than a pious piece of paper, insisting on a tight deal with intrusive checking and penalties for offenders, will not yield the universal unanimity needed for tackling transnational problems like pollution.

From a political feasibility perspective, as national sovereignty is still a prized commodity, it is wisest to let Paris set up a model where the task of measuring, monitoring and reporting is left to each country’s government with technical assistance from international bodies that are discreet, just as member states of the UN periodically review their human rights records and present their compliance reports to the world body.

This is not the perfectly ambitious or robust approach that green civil society campaigners desire, but at least having an incremental deal on the table in Paris is better than coming home empty-handed with no lighthouse to guide and direct us in the decades to come.

The other sticking issue at COP21 will be financing the adoption of green technology in developing countries. The oft-cited magic figure of \$100 billion per year to be transferred from rich to poor countries to enable the latter to move towards renewables and low-carbon economic growth is thin on specifics.

The umbrella grouping of developing countries, G-77, has serious misgivings about “climate apartheid” and is suspicious that the developed world will recycle pre-existing channels of aid such as those meant for poverty reduction and double count them towards its green financing obligations.

Since climate change is driven not just by current emissions, but by the massive legacy of carbon left in the atmosphere by centuries of unhindered pollution by industrialised countries, the Global South will keep demanding climate justice at Paris. As part of negotiations, leading players of G-77 like India have proposed they can execute deeper and faster cuts to carbon emissions if industrialised nations live up to their monetary pledges and offer “finance and technology free of intellectual property rights cost.”

Be it financing or complying with decarbonisation, nothing worthwhile can emerge from Paris unless giant carbon-discharging private corporations work in tandem with governments to walk the talk. Sensing the progressive mood of climate-concerned investors and environmentally conscious consumers, large companies have verbally fallen in line with the COP21’s agenda. But the litmus test lies in what happens to complex carbon pricing and cap-and-trade schemes within each country and region, and how transparently corporate malfeasance and backsliding will be exposed and corrected.

The UN’s climate chief Christiana Figueres has reposed hope in “a massive mobilisation of non-state actors”, including businesses, to meet the Paris objectives. If COP21 is to be a milestone rather than a “greenwash”, as radical ecologists allege, the onus is on vigilant grassroots actors who should keep challenging recalcitrant industries and retrograde government policies, and furthering small innovations that reduce human abuse of nature.

Paris has been described by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as “the floor, not the ceiling of our ambition”. Building upon the modest start of this diplomatic spectacle, we need round-the-clock social movements of citizens to raise the environmental banner, set progressively higher benchmarks and ratchet up national commitments.

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