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OPINIONS

Paris pact: Only a first step



BY **DAN JACOBSON** POSTED 12.15.2015

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As the pixels settle on the agreement reached at COP 21 — the United Nations’ effort to stave off the worst impacts of global warming by getting countries to limit the man made pollution that accelerates — there is a lot to learn and a roadmap of next steps that need to happen.

The Paris **agreement** marks the first time that 195 countries have committed to act to reduce global warming. And one key element is that countries “would pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees C”. Scientists teach that this benchmark is critical to avoid devastating impacts of climate change that could render the planet uninhabitable. The document includes provisions to track, verify, and update individual national pollution reduction strategies every five years.

This agreement is a great first step, but we need more. It will not go far enough to stave off the worst impacts of global warming. BUT it is a first step. And like any marathon, it needs to be followed by a second, third, fourth step, and thousands more. And because the science is so clear, the danger is so high and the perils are great, we



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need the steps to come VERY quickly.

While this is the first time that 195 countries have come together to agree on a goal of stopping short of 1.5 degrees, the commitments each nation has made don't add up to enough to reach the goal. Scientists have already explained to us that the agreement does not go far enough, even if all the terms are met with one hundred percent success. We could still see rising sea levels that will decimate island nations and destroy coastal cities (where so much of the world's population currently lives); we could see more droughts and severe storms; and there is a real threat to our food production system.

The Best Things that Happened at COP 21:

The most important work that has happened to date, and the most important work that will happen in the up coming years is the work being done at state, province, country, city, town, and village levels. Governor Brown and mayors from around the world took center stage.

As we have been saying and doing for years, the sub-nationals—cities and states—are leading the way when it comes to climate change. California has agreed to generate 50% of its electricity from clean energy by 2030. New York has just set a goal of generating 50% of its electricity from clean energy by 2030. There are many reasons sub-nationals are taking the lead: local leaders feel the impacts of climate change, local leaders are trying to figure out how to reduce the impacts that the scientists say are coming, and special interest groups haven't focused their powers at City Halls and in State Capitols as they have at the federal level.

Business is stepping up to help solve the problem. Concerned about their bottom line ability to grow in the future, businesses are starting to speak up about global warming. The difference between the COP in Paris (2015) and the COP in Copenhagen (2009) is that business is now firmly on the side of trying to stave off the worst impacts of climate change. The businesses include the full spectrum of the markets and not just the ones who caught on early (the skiing industry). Insurance, banking, transportation, construction, health care, and many others are now working to solve this crisis. Even some of the coal and oil companies who are suffering from lower world prices did not work to derail the COP 21 in Paris. For example, this past Saturday BP called the Paris agreement a "landmark climate change deal" and "pledged to be part of the solution." And other oil companies have agreed to a carbon tax.

Grassroots activism continues to be massive. Millions of people from around the world are calling world leaders and their own leaders to get to work on climate change. The evidence at this COP was clear. Young people, grandparents, people from every country in the world are taking to the streets and demanding solutions to global warming. Some are marching, some are singing, some are sitting, some are hanging from bridges. Regardless of what they are doing, the impact continues to grow.

What Did Not Happen at COP 21:

—COP 21 has not figured out how to leave fossil fuels in the ground. The science says that we have to get to a decarbonized world in the next 15-35 years; that means we

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have to leave MOST of the fossil fuels in the ground. To date, no nation has shown the political leadership to make this a reality. Sadly, California has not taken the leadership to keep its oil in the ground.

A number of great panels were held by people with clear sight and focus on horizons for our grandchildren. They described what the current dangers are from digging, drilling and fracking. Panelists described health impacts from spills, leaks, and accidents; worker impacts; community impacts, and more. But these panels and the calls from communities all over the world are falling on carbon clogged ears. Leaders are still taking the easier path at this point. They want to stave off climate impacts with clean energy (great news), but want to continue to drill for oil, frack for gas, and mine for coal. We can't continue to extract fossil fuel from the ground and de-carbonize our economy. Action is needed now.

—Short Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCP) need more attention. Gases like methane and black carbon have a greater ability to raise the temperature and cause severe health impacts. By reducing our use of these pollutants, we can buy some time to decarbonize the whole economy. By phasing out the use of SLCP we can protect people's health.

The Roadmap from Here is Very Clear:

We need to continue to get direct reductions in carbon. There is a lot of attention paid to pricing carbon, but we need to continue to get reductions and get them quickly. Renewable energy standards are an example of real time, real carbon reductions. Energy efficiency and electrifying our transportation are further examples of carbon reductions.

We need to maximize existing clean energy technologies on the path to 100% clean energy.

We need to continue to work at the grassroots and get more people involved by showing the direct impacts that global warming is having on them. In many communities that means showing the health impacts; in others, it is showing the dangers from rising sea levels or the connections from a drought to their lives. This connection enables us to solve to problems and to organize and create change more effectively.

We need to continue to succeed at every level. The COPs are a cumbersome process that will only succeed if we act at every level to push beyond the goals set and ensure that we are setting tougher goals faster. The good news is that agreements can and should be made that will help to share information, technology, and ideas. Locals can and will move much faster than the United Nations will. We need to continue to excite this work.

Specifically we need:To get states to adopt strong clean power plans under President Obama's Clean Power Plan.

Cities and states need to continue to solve this problem by getting to 100 percent (and in some cases 120 percent) renewables. We need grassroots organizing to pass legislation that will use more solar, wind and geothermal energy.

We need to shift to 100% clean cars and electrify our transportation system quickly.

We need to make all our homes and buildings net zero energy buildings through efficiency and solar panels.

We need to leave the fossil fuels in the ground.

We need to focus on phasing out Short Lived Climate Pollutants.

We need to divest from fossil fuels.

We need to start planning for the worst impacts of climate change and ensure that we are ready to adapt to the new world in which we will be living.

The Bottom Line:

We took a first step, but if we don't want to fall on our faces, we need to take a LOT of steps in a big hurry.



Ed's Note: Dan Jacobson is the executive director of Environment California.



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