

Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris

The annual climate talks are under way in Paris, France. The event is titled Conference of the Parties (COP) and, because this is 21st time for these specific world meetings, this time it has the short form COP 21. The “Parties” include almost all of the Earth’s nations, about 195 now.

The United Nations Framework on Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) was discussed and created that Rio Earth summit in 1992. The first COP took place in Berlin, Germany in 1995. The process has a history but almost no success with the earlier goal of stabilising atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) to avoid “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”

There has been a pattern to these previous 20 meetings. They feature optimism and despair, agreement and anger condensed into a manic two weeks. They start slowly and hopeful talk happens at the meet and greet and in the early days. Later in the first week the language gets tougher as the fundamental differences crystallise. A variety of accusations are made and delegations from some countries or whole alliances of nations threaten to leave early in the second week. Various media announce “climate deal on the brink of collapse”.

But life and negotiation goes on – often at meetings behind doors between strategically important countries. Stated reasons for guarded optimism and compromise are made which gets process to the official close. This time this happens on Friday December 11. The meetings then go into overtime and, if COP 21 mirrors the past, the Conference of the Parties will conclude at midday on Saturday or even later.

The goal on the COP 21 website is: “. . . will, for the first time in over 20 years of UN negotiations, aim to achieve a legally binding and universal agreement on climate, with the aim of keeping global warming below 2°C”.

This COP has some differences from previous ones. Recent months have featured demands for action on climate change from organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary fund. Munich Re, a leading global reinsurance company, states that “Any further adjournment of a legally binding CO2 emission-limitation legislation towards future world climate summits will increase the need for adaptation measures (and the financing thereof) to changing weather patterns and weather risks. Recent studies underline that this would not be a reasonable way to handle climate impacts – neither in humanitarian nor in economic terms.”

Pope Francis has made action on climate change a moral issue. Technology and politics alone are not enough without ethical considerations. He expressed his concern for nature, for future generations and especially for vulnerable people around the world who are at greatest risk from the impacts of climate change.

There is considerable input from the public and non-governmental organizations this time. Politicians can be pliable to such pressure.

- Last year was globally the warmest year in the instrument record. All but one of the 15 warmest years have occurred in the 21st Century (1998 is in sixth place).
- This year will be considerably warmer than 2014.

There are a few reasons for optimism in Paris

- Discussion if warming and associated climate change is happening is almost non-existent
- To date 140 countries have submitted their greenhouse reduction plans. Although the combined impact of these reductions is estimated to result in a 2.7° C global temperature rise - it is an improvement from previous years.
- The stated goal in Paris is to toughen these plans so that the maximum global rise will be less than 2° C in order to prevent more dangerous climate change such as more extreme weather including droughts and floods as well as from rising sea levels and coastal damage.

- World leaders committed to attend is more than ever before – about 150, and different than before, most are coming in the early days.
- Some (previous) world leaders will not be anywhere near Paris. People like Stephen Harper, George W. Bush and Tony Abbott (Australia), acknowledged for their role in failure of previous talks, are no longer in power.

Some hurdles are gone or lower, many remain, including central issues such as

- Historical carbon emissions
- Who should take most responsibility for cutting emissions
- Who pays, especially for poorer countries
- Resistance to having a price for carbon emissions

Who wants what?

The European Union's 2030 targets include a 40 per cent cut in emissions, an increase of renewables to 27 per cent and a 27 per cent improvement in energy efficiency. These targets are already locked in legislation. The EU insists that both the enforcement mechanism and the targets themselves be legally binding. A binding international treaty has appeal for the EU (which can easily attain the terms), some developing countries and parts of the private sector. It could provide long-term certainty and outcomes.

But an agreement backed up by the force of international law has little or no appeal for two of the biggest players – The United States and India. The US is already in election mode for November 2016 and neither of Democrats or Republicans will even suggest this. India is committing to a coal-fuelled short-term future.

China is less predictable. Air pollution reduction and its vast investment in solar and other renewable energy could give China a trump card in Paris.

The likely outcomes of the Paris COP 21 include an agreement that will shame offenders but will not punish countries (or corporations) that fall short.