

The new mode of climate governance

October 23 2020, by Anthony Patt



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There is a great deal of confusion about the importance of global negotiations on climate change. Many people have the impression that what happens within their own country is unimportant, and that all the important policy-making is happening at the global level. In fact, the opposite is the case.

From Kyoto to Paris

The history of global [climate](#) policy goes back 30 years. Capping two years of negotiation, global leaders signed the United Nations

Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, and then the first sub-agreement to that treaty in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol. Their guiding assumption for Kyoto was that reducing [greenhouse gas emissions](#) was expensive, and that no country would voluntarily bear the cost of doing so unless it knew that other countries were doing so as well, at roughly comparable levels.

Hence the negotiators structured Kyoto around a set of binding national emissions cuts, each country to about a 5% reduction over a ten-year period, and a system to punish countries that did not fulfill their commitments. Also on the assumption of high [costs](#) they set up a set of global carbon markets, to shift some emissions cuts to those countries where the costs were lower. Developing countries did not commit to emissions cuts, justified by their need to concentrate on raising living standards. Since their emissions at that time were small, this was not a deal breaker.

Once the initial set of emission cuts under Kyoto had taken place, ending in 2012, negotiators returned to agree on a second round of commitments. By then, developing country emissions had grown substantially, and it was also becoming clear that long-term emission cuts would have to be 100%. They reached an impasse, because developing countries were still not willing to subject to binding [emissions cuts](#), and many [wealthy countries](#)—such as Japan, Australia, and the United States—were equally unwilling if the [developing countries](#) were not on board.

From regime to agreement

So the negotiators started over, and came up with a very different treaty in 2015: the Paris Agreement. In this, all countries agree to set national emission reduction targets, and to update these targets every five years, but what those targets are is completely up to them.

Moreover, if a country fails to meet its target, there will be no punishment forthcoming. All countries also commit to work together to share data about their emissions, about the policies that they have put in place to reduce those emissions, and about the level of climate investment taking place. Wealthy countries agree to provide financial and technical assistance to poorer ones, helping them to reduce their emissions.

In our work for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assessing the effectiveness of the international cooperation, colleagues and I have assembled hundreds of scientific papers evaluating the Paris Agreement. Many are highly critical. Where are the binding targets? Where is the disincentive for free-riding? Where is a global carbon market to facilitate emissions trading and a lowering of total costs? Others, however, argue that the Paris Agreement is in fact a step forward. I have come to belong to that group. To explain why, a look at the global response to the corona crisis can be helpful.

A rationale for cooperation

As I write this, nearly all of the wealthy countries have largely brought the death rate from COVID 19 well down from the initial wave, although we are in the middle of a second wave when it comes to new cases. The economic cost of the first-wave lockdown steps was high, but countries took such actions anyway, believing the costs—economic and humanitarian—would have been far higher without.

There was no global agreement obligating countries to fight the virus. But there didn't need to be, because every country had an incentive to fight it, regardless of what other countries were doing. A more limited form of international cooperation to fight the coronavirus has emerged. There has been a tremendous amount of sharing of data, with respect to both case numbers and evolving medical best practices. There is starting

to be more assistance specifically from wealthy to poorer countries, such as with medical supplies. The World Bank has just launched a program to distribute the anticipated vaccines. The rationale for international support is simply that the faster we can deal with the crisis globally, the better it is for all of us, reducing the enormous death toll and the unprecedented economic costs.

Changing economic reality

I see similarities to climate change. Most importantly, the fundamental economics of [climate change](#) have shifted since Kyoto was signed. Starting two decades ago, many countries enacted policies to stimulate investment into [renewable energy technologies](#), and these have borne fruit: with "learning-by-doing" and increasing economies of scale, the costs of these technologies have fallen dramatically.

For example, the total costs of owning and driving a car that runs on renewable electricity are now often lower than for a car that uses gasoline or diesel fuel. In more and more cases the shift to zero-carbon energy sources saves money, even taking into account the cost of new infrastructure. Nearly across the board, emissions in wealthy countries have started to fall, and as new policies take effect, I am optimistic that this trend should accelerate.

But this stands in contrast to poorer countries, where emissions are still rising. In general, these countries lack the financial, technical, and governance capacities to restructure their industrial sectors around green technologies. So just as countries want to contain the coronavirus, they want to reduce their emissions, but many of them need help. It is in our interests that they get it. The Paris Agreement responds to these circumstances.

Local and national measures matter more

Every year around this time, thousands of climate negotiators converge somewhere in the world. This year it was supposed to have been Glasgow, before being postponed because of the virus. Many people treat the outcomes of the global negotiations as crucial to the future of climate protection. The reality, however, is that the last time that negotiators argued over the timing and extent of emissions reductions was almost a decade ago.

Since then, international climate negotiations have become nearly all about how countries can help each other to transform their economies green. In today's new world of climate governance, the economic and political forces for strengthening climate policy are simply stronger within each individual country than they were ever able to be in the United Nations negotiation halls. These forces must now work intensively if we still want to achieve the Paris climate target.

More information: Mariangela Scorrano et al. Modeling the Total Cost of Ownership of an Electric Car Using a Residential Photovoltaic Generator and a Battery Storage Unit—An Italian Case Study, *Energies* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/en13102584](https://doi.org/10.3390/en13102584)

Renewable Power Generation Costs in 2019:
[www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IR ... ation Costs 2019.pdf](https://www.irena.org/-/media/Files/IR...ation_Costs_2019.pdf)

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Citation: The new mode of climate governance (2020, October 23) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-10-mode-climate.html>

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