

A NEW ERA FOR CITIES: TIME TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE AT THE URBAN LEVEL

After years of negotiating, 55 countries became signatories to the 2016 Paris Agreement, in which states pledged to curb carbon emissions and take action for climate change adaptation. Applauded for its speedy ratification, the accord also identified both developing and developed countries as equally responsible in combating climate change. However, despite international praise the author argues that the Paris climate accord's shortcomings include its lack of compliance mechanisms and effective adoption measures. In this article, the author also emphasizes the importance of combating climate change at the urban level, and that non-state actors – in particular local governments and NGOs – are vital for monitoring and implementing the Paris Agreement.

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Other than some irresponsible and ignorant politicians or climate change deniers in some parts of the world, the majority believe in climate change and view the crisis as a reality. Observations, theoretical studies, and simulations have indicated an increase in global temperatures since the 1950s. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the international body for assessing the science related to climate change and according to their Fifth Assessment Report (AR5), the basis for identifying human activities as the primary driver of climate change has been strengthened; it is at least 95 percent certain that human activities have caused more than half of the temperature increase since the mid-20th century.¹ According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), if we keep burning fossil fuels at the current rate, a global average temperature rise of three degrees Celsius by the end of the century is likely – a stark contrast with the pre-industrial age.

International scientists and experts agree that limiting global temperature rise to under two degrees Celsius this century will reduce the likelihood of extreme weather conditions such as intense storms, longer droughts, heat waves, a sea level rise, and other severe climate impacts. Even achieving the lower target of 1.5 degrees Celsius will merely reduce its negative impacts, but not entirely eliminate. Across the globe, we are witnessing extreme climate events; they are either unusual, unpredictable, or unseasonal. Those who deny climate change and the media tend to give predictable responses, however evidence confirms that some of these environmental consequences are related to human activities.

To prevent the most severe impacts of climate change, parties subject to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris finally agreed to limit the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius in December 2015. After years of negotiating, the Paris Agreement² entered into force on 4 November 2016, 30 days after at least 55 signatories – accounting for an estimated 55 percent of the total greenhouse emissions – deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, approval, or accession with the Depositary.³ According to the UN, it was the fastest

¹ The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was set up in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to provide policymakers with regular assessments of the scientific basis of climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for adaptation and mitigation. IPCC assessments provide a scientific basis for governments at all levels to develop climate related policies, and they underlie negotiations at the UN Climate Conference – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

² The authentic text of the Paris Agreement can be downloaded at UNFCCC website: http://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/convention/application/pdf/english_paris_agreement.pdf

³ UN Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has 197 Parties and among these, 160 Parties have ratified the Paris Agreement as of August 2017. Turkey signed the Paris Agreement in 2015, however, it has not ratified it yet. Turkish Government has not declared any plans to submit the Agreement to the Turkish parliament in the near future.

international ratification to date:

The speed at which countries have made the Paris's Agreement's entry into force possible is unprecedented in recent experience of international agreements, and is a powerful confirmation of the importance nations attach to combating climate change and realizing the multitude of opportunities inherent in the Paris Agreement.⁴

Prior to the Paris Agreement, the UNFCC put the onus on developed countries to lead the way in combating climate change, as they have historically been the source of most greenhouse gas emissions. Industrialized countries no doubt bear the biggest responsibility of the past and present climate crises, however current climate crises cannot be decoupled from the developing countries' actions which also increase global emissions. Under the Kyoto Agreement there was a distinction between developing and developed countries, yet the Paris Agreement recognizes that climate change is a global problem and that every country – both developed and developing – should contribute to climate change mitigation efforts.

"Prior to the Paris Agreement, the UNFCC put the onus on developed countries to lead the way in combating climate change."

The establishment of a long-term mitigation goal to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emission by mid-century, and the focus on building the capacity for countries and non-state actors to adapt to climate change are among the Agreement's most significant achievements. However, it does not assure the populations of developing and less developed countries that the Paris Agreement is binding enough to deliver its promise of a livable climate for all. Delegates at the UNFCCC can only do so much unless the fossil fuel demand is cut across the globe and governments disregard fossil fuel lobbies and begin listening both to local people and scientific facts.

Neither a Miracle, nor a Disaster

In the words of George Monbiott, an author who followed the climate deal in 2015, “By comparison to what it could have been, it’s a miracle. By comparison to what it should have been, it’s a disaster.”⁵ This article argues that the Paris Agreement is

⁴ This is part of a speech by Patricia Espinoza, Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

⁵ George Monbiott, “Grand promises of Paris climate deal undermined by squalid retrenchments,” *The Guardian*, 12 December 2015.

neither. Those who hoped for it to be a miracle were hoping for a deal to save the planet, and some of those who labeled it a disaster were trying to turn the clock back to Copenhagen.⁶ It is not realistic to expect one UN Agreement to save the planet, nor is it reasonable to ignore the critical developments on an international and national level regarding the fight against climate change in the past decade.

“Recognition of the 1.5 degrees Celsius target and the correct emphasis on the long-term goal to ensure carbon neutrality have been critical achievements of the Paris climate accord.”

gasses. The Agreement's main shortcoming is related to its governance structure; it is based on contributions, not commitments. The nationally determined contributions (NDCs) detail the emissions cuts each country intends to make in order to reach the goal of limiting the global temperature rise to two degrees Celsius. However, a bottom-up approach by countries to cut greenhouse gas emissions (mainly carbon dioxide and methane) must be far more ambitious in order to achieve the target as set by the Paris Agreement. Far from being ambitious, the pledges made by the majority of signatories are rather conservative. In its 2016 Emissions Gap Report,⁷ the UNEP underlined that “pledges collectively are not ambitious enough to have a better starting point in 2020 to meet the 2030 levels of global greenhouse gas emissions consistent with the longer-term goals of below two or 1.5 degrees Celsius.”⁸ Other studies claim that even if all the current 2030 pledges are achieved, global warming will still pass the critical threshold and be above 2.7 degrees Celsius by 2100.⁹

⁶ UN Climate Summit (UNFCCC COP 15) that took place in Copenhagen in 2015 resulted in the rather weak Copenhagen Accord. COP (Conference of the Parties) 15 in Copenhagen has been a huge disappointment as it failed to produce a binding agreement to tackle climate change. With its low targets and not meaningful goals, not only environmentalists, climate activists, and scientists, but also many politicians and bureaucrats consider it as a spectacular failure in tackling disastrous effects of climate change.

⁷ Since 2010, United Nations Environment (UNEP) has produced annual *Emissions Gap Reports* based on requests by countries for an independent scientific assessment of how actions and pledges by countries affect the global greenhouse gas emissions trend, and how this compares to emissions trajectories consistent with the long-term goal of UNFCCC. The difference has become known as the emissions gap.

⁸ *The Emissions Gap Report 2016*, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), November 2016.

⁹ Peter Christoff, “The promissory note: COP 21 and the Paris Climate Agreement,” *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2016), pp. 765-787, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2016.1191818>

Paris also differs from the Kyoto Agreement as the former recognizes the need to offer developing and the least developed countries financial resources to help offset their costs. However, despite Article 9 of the Agreement,¹⁰ the pledges of developed countries to mobilize 100 billion dollars per year by 2020 is highly unlikely, considering only 60 billion dollars has been committed so far.¹¹ The main criticism related to climate finance is related to its inadequate size and the unfair role of the polluters. In other words, the financier developed countries have too large a role in defining which projects will be financed and how much will be paid to the developing countries.

It is important to briefly mention the issue of loss and damage.¹² Although Article 8 of the Paris Agreement integrated loss and damage as an independent third pillar of the climate regime, it did so in a very soft way by excluding the possibility of liability or compensation under loss and damage.¹³ Article 8.3 of the Agreement “clarifies that action on loss and damage shall be cooperative and facilitative and be undertaken in coordination with competent bodies inside and outside of the UNFCCC structure.” The way the contentious issue of liability and compensation were dealt with at COP21 in Paris and the ultimate compromise on loss and damage led to the disappointment of vulnerable countries and environmental NGOs who have been advocating for climate justice and for an explicit adoption in the mechanism’s scope.

The Paris Agreement has been criticized by several academics, environmental movements, and climate justice movements for disregarding the needs of developing states (and disadvantaged groups) to deal with the impacts of climate change-related disasters, as well as to undertake effective adoption measures. It is critical to underline that climate change has never been a solely environmental problem, rather, it has always been closely related to poverty and development. The poorest 70 percent of the world’s population is responsible for only 15 percent of the global emissions. Ecological/ carbon debt and historical responsibility have always been at the very center of the climate issue. Developed countries – the biggest emitter countries – and its citizens should recognize their indebtedness to the societies living in the developing and the less developed world. Their actions and

¹⁰ Article 9 states that “developed country Parties shall provide financial resources to assist developing country Parties with respect to both mitigation and adaptation in continuation of their existing obligations under the Convention.”

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¹² In the UNFCCC context, loss and damage involves the development of approaches to address the effects of extreme climate related disasters on the most vulnerable developing countries. Not only did they contribute to the climate change problem, they also lack capacity to manage negative impacts of climate change, yet they are recognized as bearing disproportionate costs from climate change.

¹³ For a brief essay on loss and damage, check out Climate Home brief notes: “Loss and Damage in the Paris Agreement,” *Climate Focus Client Brief*, December 2015.

“The Agreement’s main shortcoming is related to its governance structure; it is based on contributions, not commitments.”

policies have led to the damaging effects of climate change and therefore they are running up a debt towards the less developed and developing countries. To pay for their carbon debt, countries historically responsible for emissions should transfer climate finance to the poorest countries and those most vulnerable to climate change – often small islands states.¹⁴

Non-State Actors as Hope for the Climate

Jamie Morgan sums up very well the lack of governance instruments, overall strategy, and timetable by claiming: “[Paris] is not an agreement of what will be done, by whom, and to what degree, rooted in the actual science and forecasts from the various authoritative sources.”¹⁵

Although academics and experts from a multitude of disciplines have written excellent criticisms regarding the limitations, weaknesses, and omissions of the Paris climate accord, the introduction of non-state actors has been largely received positively. The role non-state actors can play for global climate governance in the post-Paris era is important.

The international community has recognized long ago that the challenges of climate change cannot be tackled by nation states and international organizations alone. The Paris Agreement finally envisioned an active role for non-state actors, most importantly cities and NGOs. In addition to local governments and civil society organizations, there are several non-state actors, which have been playing different roles in terms of bearing responsibility and providing solutions to climate change, including academia, the media, regional, international organizations, and the private sector.

Cities have historically been recognized as important actors in the international scene – in finance, trade, or cultural centers – and have recently become increasingly critical actors in addressing environmental issues, such as climate change. States as national structures and the UN as an international body have proven inadequate in addressing climate change challenges and concrete climate crises at the

¹⁴ Ethemcan Turhan, Arif Cem Gündoğan, Cem İskender Aydin and Mustafa Özgür Berke, İklim Adaleti Mücadelesi içün 10 Durak [10 Stops for Fighting for Climate Justice], *Ekoloji Kolektifi*, June 2017, İstanbul.

¹⁵ Jamie Morgan, “Paris COP 21: Power that Speaks the Truth?” *Globalizations*, Vol. 13, No. 6 (2016) <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2016.1163863>

urban level. However, it would be unfair to argue that governments are not acting at all. Compared to a decade ago, especially in the post-Paris Agreement period, many central governments around the globe are taking important steps in combating climate change. However, the majority of national policies are either too late, too little, or too slow. One can name several politicians who are talking “the talk” and walking “the walk,” but in this part of the world, it is almost impossible to find a leader, politician, or an MP who champions nationwide climate policies.

Against this backdrop, non-state actors, especially local governments and NGOs, are of critical importance for monitoring climate pledges, displaying the benefits of transition, and providing new solutions to adaptation problems. Mayors and other local government leaders have begun to see and accept climate change as a local challenge to be dealt with within their power before the Paris Agreement. Especially when it comes to climate change adaptation, several mayors do not see it as an international problem to be solved by the UN, rather, they view it as a national matter to be responded to by national capitals.

Cities: Both the Problem and the Solution

It is critical to remember that cities are not always innocent or formerly overlooked actors in adaptation and mitigation efforts. As the IPCC’s Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) indicated, “urban areas are a key driver of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions across multiple sectors and currently account for over 70 percent of global energy use.”¹⁶ In other words, they are guilty of pumping pollutants into the atmosphere. Cities use natural resources not only within their own borders, but for instance bring water from other river basins outside city boundaries, in effect, depleting the harmony of rural regions. Furthermore, urban planning most of the time focuses on economic growth, resulting in destruction of natural habitats for the sake fossil fuel energy investments, industrial projects, construction of buildings, transportation projects, etc.

Two-thirds of the world’s population will live in urban centers by 2050.¹⁷ Urbanization is increasing in low and middle-income countries at a faster pace. More than 90 percent of global urban growth is taking place in developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which means the number of vulnerable groups who are exposed to climate risks is also increasing.¹⁸ As can be seen in the Figure I, climate change is expected to affect different aspects of urban life:¹⁹

¹⁶ “Climate Change - Implications for Cities,” p. 5, www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/ipcc

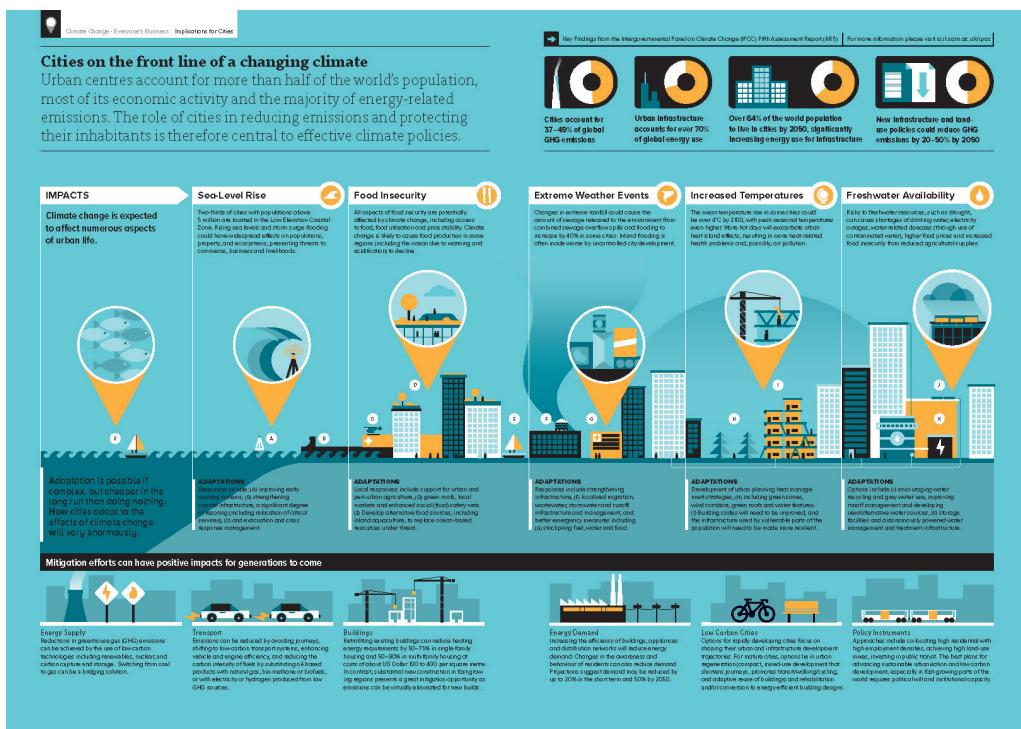
¹⁷ The U.N. Department of Economics and Social Affairs (UNESA).

¹⁸ Stefanie Knoll, “Economic growth and developing world cities: The benefits of urban clustering,” *Journalist’s Resource*, 3 June 2014, <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/environment/cities/economic-growth-developing-world-cities-benefits-urban-clustering>

¹⁹ Rian van Saden, “Climate Change - Implications for Cities,” pp. 8-9, www.cisl.cam.ac.uk/ipcc

- extreme weather events (frequency and intensity of weather events such as droughts, floods, storms, cyclones, and heat)
- rising sea levels
- rising temperatures
- food insecurity
- water insecurity

Figure I: Climate Change - Implications for Cities



The bad news is that climate change-related disasters in urban areas will become more frequent with the increase of global greenhouse gas emissions. The good news is that adaptation solutions exist for cities. Cities as non-state actors can and must adopt effective adaptation tools to protect their urban residents, and local governments should see governing climate as a priority in the face of increased climate hazards. Improved resilience and adaptation measures cannot be delayed as the policy measures first focus on effective responses now. Adaptation ideas are briefly provided in the above-mentioned infographic. “Climate Change Implications for Cities” document which summarizes key findings from the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) points out:

Urban adaptation provides opportunities for a shift towards resilience and sustainable development via multi-level urban risk management, alignment of policies and incentives, strengthened local government and community adaptation capacity, synergies with the Local governments can be active and effective in terms of adopting adaptation policies at 3 levels:

- International level: as non-state actors part of the Paris Agreement affected by cross-border climate challenges, they can contribute to international adaptation policies
- Regional/local level: as regional players in their countries, they can adopt specific regional adaptation policies
- National level: as national stakeholders reflecting specific conditions of their countries, they can contribute to national urban policies

Metropolitan cities have already become a transnational political force and we are now in a new era where small to medium sized cities are following suit. An increasing number of cities are becoming part of international platforms such as, the Compact of Mayors, ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), UN Habitat III, and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy. All of these are voluntary frameworks and mayors/cities are willing to become members and adopt targets and strategic objectives with like-minded neighbors in distant parts of the world. Unlike the binding power of the UNFCCC over nation states, these platforms do not have a legal power over cities, yet they encourage and inspire mayors to become active leaders not only in their countries, but also players in the global issue of climate change.

“The role non-state actors can play for global climate governance in the post-Paris era is important.”

The Paris Agreement may have legally opened the way “to hybrid forms of governance such as standards and best practices,” but the voluntary global and regional platforms have already proven the case of new forms of climate governance being practiced by mayors.²⁰ In other words, the Paris Agreement’s inclusion of non-state actors in tackling climate change is only following the developments on the ground. Having said that, the inclusion of non-state actors in the Paris Agreement still carries weight as the Agreement “tells us that climate governance can no longer be a form of environmental governance but the governance of multiple forms of vulnerabilities

²⁰ Asuncion Lera St. Clair and Kjersti Aalbu, “The four transformative governance shifts emerging from COP21,” *Oslo Academy of Global Governance working paper*, Vol. 1 (2016).

and the enabling of innovation and opportunities.”²¹

Cities may be vibrant, dynamic, and innovative engines, but at the same time, they are also the root of many problems of environment, poverty, social equity, social justice, and immigration. The way forward for cities may be in new governance models at the urban level focusing on sustainability, resilience, social inclusion, and justice. A just climate governance at the urban level cannot be decoupled from those interrelated issues. Cities that want to move towards acting on the broad agenda of sustainability must take climate change into account as a top priority. It is time cities realized they are at the very center of climate debate and climate is their business too.

²¹ Asuncion Lera St. Clair and Kjersti Aalbu (2016).