



Global Development and Environment Institute
Tufts University

Paris Talks Get Underway

by Anne-Marie Codur, in Paris, and Jonathan Harris*

The atmosphere was electric in Paris on a beautiful sunny Sunday November 29th, as world leaders gathered and hundreds of thousands marched worldwide for action on climate change. Security considerations after the Paris terrorist attacks led to the cancellation of what would probably have been the largest climate march in history, with up to one million marchers for Climate Action in the streets of the French Capital, on the eve of the COP21 climate talks. But the question that dominated the events of late November and early December in Paris was: would the world's assembled countries live up to the promise of finally taking serious action to prevent catastrophic climate change?

Pascal Canfin, Director of Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), former French Minister of Development (from the Green Party), and former advisor to President François Hollande on climate change policy, took an optimistic view. Responding to the criticism that national pledges are insufficient, and even if implemented would result in a global temperature increase of 2.7 degrees Celsius, or 5.9 degrees Fahrenheit or more, Canfin argues that at a minimum the pledges would avert the catastrophic scenario of 4 degrees Celsius or 7 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century.¹

According to Canfin, COP21's main goal is to put in place the architecture for future climate commitments that will become increasingly stringent and constraining. The way to insure this is by building a mechanism where: 1) once commitments are made, countries will not be able to withdraw from them after a 5 years assessment, and 2) each country will get incentives every 5 years to make more and more ambitious commitments. The success of the COP, Canfin suggests, will be measured in its ability to produce such mechanism.

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* Anne-Marie Codur is a Research Fellow and Jonathan Harris is Senior Research Associate at GDAE. Comments may be sent to codur@hotmail.com or jonathan.harris@tufts.edu.

Role of China and India

A promising sign is that China has indicated that it would be ready to start this 5-year commitment process as early as 2017-18 without waiting for 2020 as originally planned. The US is also supporting this proposal. India, which has been viewed as reluctant to commit, has also stepped up with a proposal for an international alliance to raise more than \$1 trillion for solar energy development especially in tropical countries. According to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, “Solar technology is evolving, costs are coming down and grid connectivity is improving,” he said. “The dream of universal access to clean energy is becoming more real. This will be the foundation of the new economy of the new century.”²

India has also articulated a developing country demand that rich countries make good on their earlier pledges for technology transfers and aid to climate adaptation. At the Copenhagen climate conference in 2009, countries agreed on \$100 billion per year of transfer from the North to the South, but these funds have not yet been mobilized, and the willingness of India and other developing nations to be part of an agreement will depend on this promise being fulfilled.

One of the ideas to find those funds is a tax on financial transactions. In France, Canfin and others have promoted this idea for the past 5 years and proposed a plan to generate a minimum of \$10 billion per year (raised from the 11 European countries which have accepted the principle of such tax).

Responsibilities, capabilities, and fair shares

According to a report by a coalition of civil society organizations, the responsibility for emissions cuts required for a 2°C mitigation pathway should be divided among emitters according to their responsibility (based on past emissions) and capability (based on national income and its distribution), as shown in Figure 1.³

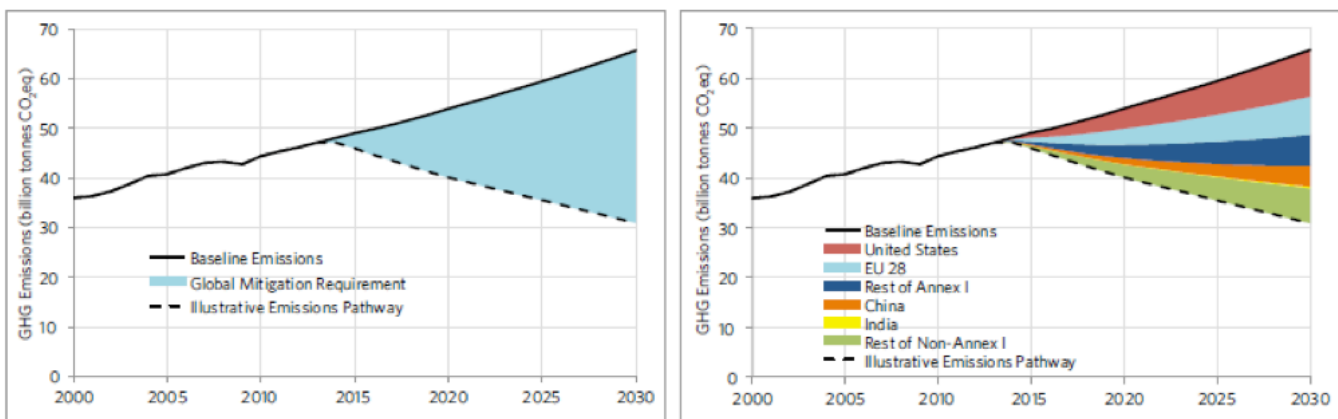


Figure 1: Global mitigation pathways

Based on this “fair shares” analysis, the pledges made to date fall drastically short of what is needed, with the wealthier countries primarily responsible for the shortfall. The wealthier countries’ “fair shares” include both domestic mitigation and aid to developing countries to support their ability to choose low-carbon development paths.

A Global Carbon Budget

Thus despite Pascal Canfin’s more optimistic approach, the challenge remains huge. There is also a conceptual gap between the voluntary pledge approach and the global “carbon budget” proposed by many scientists as the only way to hold emissions to a relatively safe level.

“The negotiators gathering in Paris will not be discussing any plan that comes close to meeting their own stated goal of limiting the increase of global temperatures to a reasonably safe level. They have pointedly declined to take up a recommendation from scientists, made several years ago, that they set a cap on total greenhouse gases as a way to achieve that goal, and then figure out how to allocate the emissions fairly. The pledges countries are making are voluntary, and were established in most nations as a compromise between the desire to be ambitious and the perceived cost and political difficulty of emissions cutbacks.”⁴

Future GDAE climate policy briefs will explore ways of resolving this dilemma, both by more drastic carbon emissions reductions and by promoting carbon absorption through forests, ecosystems, and soils. New technology, falling prices, and rapid deployment of solar and other renewable energy systems make these more ambitious goals feasible – though not easy. The Paris conference is the first, not the last, step, in achieving a global commitment to effective action.

¹ <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/planete/cop21/20151129.OBS0351/cop21-pascal-canfin-nous-avons-fait-la-moitie-du-chemin.html>

² “India unveils global solar alliance of 120 countries at Paris climate summit,” *Guardian* November 30, 2015; “India and France seek to raise \$1tn for cheap solar power,” *Financial Times* December 1, 2015.

³ Climate Equity Reference Project, *Fair Shares: A Civil Society Equity Review of INDCs*, November 2015, http://civilsocietyreview.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/CSO_FullReport.pdf

⁴ Justin Gillis, “Paris Climate Talks Avoid Scientists’ Idea of ‘Carbon Budget’”, *New York Times* Nov 28, 2015.

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Tufts University, 44 Teele Avenue, Medford, MA 02155, USA

Telephone: 617 627-3530

E-mail: gdae@tufts.edu

Website: <http://ase.tufts.edu/gdae>

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