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BLOG POST November 21st 2017

COP23: business as usual?

Authors

Judith Voss-Stemping
Research Fellow, International Climate Governance

David Levaï
Associate Researcher

Reading time: 6 min

COP23, presided by Fiji and hosted by Germany in Bonn, ended in the early hours of Saturday, November 18. Although many commentators expected this 'intermediary' session to be dull, packed with technical negotiations required to deliver few concrete outcomes, these two intense weeks ended up revealing a different picture of climate engagement today.

As in previous instances since 2014, in Lima, Paris, and Marrakech last year, we had anticipated growing attention towards the Global Climate Action Zone, where governments as well other stakeholders such as businesses, cities or investors showcase their actions and achievements. But few people had imagined that this would be the heart of the annual UN Climate Conference, rendering intergovernmental negotiations almost irrelevant. For anyone covering the 1.2 km between the *Bula Zone*, where negotiations took place, and the *Bonn Zone,* dedicated to climate action, this sentiment was unequivocal: two different but isolated worlds. The former focusing on processes and procedures, while the latter, home to coalitions and initiatives led by a variety of actors, both public and private, hosted a myriad of side events, held thematic days focused on implementing sectoral action on energy, forests, finance, transport or resilience.

A long list of initiatives and announcements followed one another: The “war on coal” was central putting Germany, the host country, in a difficult position; Michael Bloomberg, now Special Envoy for climate change for the UN Secretary General, announced he would contribute 50 million dollars to help Europe transition out of coal; while Canada and the UK—joined by close to 20 other countries and some regions—launched an alliance to fully phase out coal by the end of the next decade. Other coalitions established their leadership by planning for carbon neutrality by 2050—through the 2050 Pathway Platform—or by providing cover and support against climate catastrophes to 400 million people among the most vulnerable through the InsuResilience Initiative (Global Partnership for Climate and Disaster Risk Finance and Insurance Solutions).

Because of the US’ peculiar situation, an unprecedented pavilion of the "alternative" US movement *We Are Still In,* a 2,500 square meter inflatable igloo, stood between the two zones and hosted events with California Governor Jerry Brown or Leonardo DiCaprio, among others. With the release of the America’s Pledge report, they achieved their objective to demonstrate not only that the US was present at this COP—with more delegates than ever—but that sub-nationals had picked up the leadership that Washington had renounced and was undertaking action.

Advancing the Paris rulebook: negotiating the technical implementation of the Paris Agreement

Progressing to the greatest extent possible on translating the grand principles of the Paris Agreement into specific provisions was a silent task, but one of the most important of this year’s COP. Headway was made on most topics, despite attempts to halt or derail negotiations by focusing on differentiation, the original bifurcation of obligations between developed and developing countries inherited from the Rio Convention, and that the Paris Agreement was supposed to overcome. After a year of record temperatures, multiplying climate impacts and little progress on financial support, vulnerable nations expressed anxiety—and even mistrust after the White House announcement to pull out of Paris—that developed countries would not fulfill their commitments before 2020. Climate finance was thus at the heart of every dispute in a legitimate tentative to put pressure on the North and will remain front and center for the next couple of year, as Parties agreed to hold a session on pre-2020 Actions and Support.

Additional expectations emerged from the visit of the German chancellor and the French president, without really providing the political momentum they had hoped for: the former stuck by failing attempts to build a government coalition, while the latter seemed to keep announcements for his upcoming summit in three weeks. Despite Macron’s promise to supplement the draining of US funding[1] to the IPCC[2]—the international community's core scientific panel supporting the Climate Convention—and Germany’s additional contribution of 100 million Euros to two UN funds (one dedicated to adaptation and the other to least developing countries), Europeans struggled to rebuild trust with their developing country partners who wanted a greater focus on solidarity and adaptation.

While most issues discussed advanced—transparency framework, NDCs, design of the Global Stocktake, implementation and compliance—progress was far lower than hoped for, building additional weight for next year. Countries are now considering an additional negotiation session to fulfill the mandated work by COP24 and achieving it will be a challenge.

The Facilitative a.k.a. "Talanoa" Dialogue

A key outcome for Fiji’s Presidency was the design of the Facilitative Dialogue, renamed *Talanoa Dialogue,* a Fijian tradition reflecting empathy and mutual understanding. This exercise’s aim is to assess progress in climate action and identify opportunities to improve future commitments. Despite its name which can be misleading, the 'dialogue' will be a continuous process throughout the entire year, paved by meetings and reports and will focus on three questions: where are we? Where do we want to be? And how do we get there? While the first two questions are more of a rhetorical nature, answering the latter—how can we generate the necessary transformation to reach climate neutrality after 2050?—is critical and must become the centerpiece of the upcoming 'dialogue'.

Two factors will be key to success: first, the Talanoa process, which was officially launched on the last day of the COP, needs to go beyond UN bodies and build on the political highlights of the year, starting with the *One Planet Summit* organized by France to build momentum on finance for the two-year anniversary of Paris Agreement on December 12, the G7 and G20-Summits in Canada and Argentina, as well as the Global Climate Action Summit in California in September 2018. Second, although the Fijian Presidency will lead the preparatory phase up to the COP, a big unknown remains on the determination of the incoming Polish Presidency. COP24 has a crucial responsibility to lay out the possibilities for revised and more ambitious contributions prior to 2020. Because ambitious commitments go far beyond setting a five or ten-year target, the Talanoa Dialogue will need to emphasize sectoral transformations, highlight conducive governance mechanisms and be in line with long-term strategies.

Conclusion

Although the attention shift from official negotiations to global climate action did not come as a surprise, the extent and scope was unexpected. In fact, commuting between Bonn and Bula Zone, one was wondering if the purpose of the meeting was to get the world on track to reach the collective goals set in Paris or rather to showcase what frontrunners were doing. More than ever before non-state actors play a crucial role to fight climate change. Nevertheless, they will not be sufficient to achieve the needed transformation, as Nations set up institutions and lay out visions for their future. This is why we have and need a universal climate regime, a global architecture that is not only composed by the better examples and the frontrunners, but is able to drive a global movement to a carbon neutral world. It was built to guide, accompany, support, and protect countries and citizens towards a sustainable future, and now needs to prove that it can deliver.

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[1] Around 2 million USD per year
[2] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

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