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Lima agreement: a watered down deal?

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Even before the end of the Lima conference, and more so since, following an overrun of around 30 hours, the general feeling about the Lima deal has been relatively negative: it appears to be a watered-down agreement that stumbles over basic concepts of the climate negotiations, such as differentiated country responsibilities, and indicates a rocky road to the Paris conference in a year's time, where a universal, binding agreement must be signed for the post-2020 climate regime.

Lima was an important step towards Paris. But it was just one step. In order to judge what happened there, we need to look at the issues at stake for the 2015 Paris climate conference, which are very clear. Today, climate action falls far short of current requirements and of future risks linked to climate change. Despite 20 years of negotiations, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to grow, putting us on a warming trajectory that is absolutely unsustainable, and climate change is beginning to have serious impacts. The key challenge for Paris is therefore to build an agreement

that drives collective action forward, one that enables the countries to meet their common goal of limiting global temperature rise to 2°C by the end of the century.

To achieve this, several lessons have been learned since Copenhagen. The first concerns the major difficulties involved in a process that has so far been “top-down”, in other words one in which all countries, or rather those countries identified at the beginning of the process as being responsible for global warming (the “Annex I” countries), must set a common goal. To overcome this, a “bottom-up” process has been launched since Warsaw, in which countries make pledges based on what they see as their fair share towards the collective effort. Some believe that by failing to impose rules for the submission and review of these pledges, Lima has gone too far in reinforcing this bottom-up approach. Clearly, adding up pledges of different natures and for different time periods by November 1, 2015, as has been decided, will be no easy matter. However, Lima has been a striking confirmation of the universal nature of the bottom-up approach. Each country pledges according to its own wishes, but each country does pledge, in a differentiated manner but according to its own capacities. This is even more remarkable given the fact that in Lima, the traditional categories of countries disintegrated, resulting in a far more complex landscape, with different pathways depending on the countries, but a lot of progressive aspirations. This is the case, for example, of a certain number of middle-income countries, which spontaneously agreed to the capitalisation of the Green Climate Fund. In Lima, the universality of climate action gained ground.

Another key element in ensuring Paris is the starting point for significantly stepping up climate action is to move from a simple goal-based approach (“I undertake to reach a given figure by a given date”) to an approach that also involves means (“I undertake to implement given actions in order to achieve this”). In this respect, even if financial resources have not been included in the indicative elements for national pledges, the discussions launched on sectoral indicators as well as experience sharing further to the review of the first commitment period for 17 countries pave the way for pledges that more clearly identify the changes that need to be made.

The final hours of the negotiations also opened up the possibility of including climate adaptation policies and projects in national pledges. Although this carries a tactical dimension for obtaining funding, it is also a means of conducting climate action as a whole, by prioritising efforts according to contexts and, more generally, by better addressing the critical safety issues raised by adaptation.

Based on the pledges confirmed by all countries, a dynamic and sustainable process must be built, one that will raise the level of ambition over time. This is the challenge for the legal structure of the Paris agreement. In this respect, once again, Lima was a non-decisive but necessary step. First, it made it possible to establish the negotiating mandate for this agreement. Next, annexed to the Lima decision is a document that constitutes a basis for discussions on the agreement. One criticism of this 37-page document is that it lists all the subjects and options available without making any choices. Indeed, it provides a whole map rather than a specific direction. That said, the options required to make the agreement dynamic and sustainable are present, and the challenge now is to strengthen the agreement around these options.

Finally, concerning the vital issue of finance, while some people suggest that the 10 billion dollars raised by the Green Climate Fund fall short of requirements, it should be recalled that a few months ago many people would not have believed that figure possible. Admittedly, it is not enough. Ten times that amount will be needed by 2020, and it must be shown that this leverage will be a core component of the Paris agreement. In addition, investment must be transferred from the old economy to the new low-carbon economy, by means of appropriate policy and financial support for those who require it. But the first threshold for the Green Climate Fund has been reached, and this is a good thing.

Let there be no mistake. Many of the ingredients are still missing and the road from here to Paris will be extremely intense. Policy dialogue will be a key part of this process, especially to develop a sense of equity between countries.

From a technical point of view, many elements need further clarification (finance and transparency, in particular), in a context in which country pledges – the first in this reformed process – could equally have a destabilising effect if they are not immediately up to the challenge. But in order to make headway on the road to Paris, we believe it is important to also take stock of the elements we can build upon.

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