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Paris Agreement signature ceremony: positive movement on road to implementation

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On April 22, 2016, 175 countries put pen to paper at the opening signatory ceremony for the Paris Agreement—the highest attendance at this event of any international agreement. This signal of continued commitment since COP21 to act collectively on climate change must be followed with concrete in-country climate action—starting now.

Signature ceremony signals strong collective commitment to implement Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement signature ceremony convened by Ban Ki Moon at the UN headquarters in New York on April 22nd signaled a very positive start of the era of implementation the new climate change regime has now entered in. This gathering, the largest ever at an opening signature ceremony for an international agreement, demonstrated the concrete commitment of 175 countries to move forward their domestic ratification processes. The large turnout—including of over 50 heads of state—at this first “high level” international event since COP21 demonstrates that countries have invested significant political capital into this process. This in turn testifies that [the adoption of the Paris Agreement](#) in December was not just empty words but that there is a clear will to collectively act now on climate change. While history has shown that a smooth and prompt passage from signature to ratification to entry into force is not a given (e.g. the US signed but did not ratify the Kyoto Protocol, which then took eight years to enter into force), in this case it is early entry into force that appears to be the most likely scenario. There was indeed much support for early ratification and entry into force of the Paris Agreement, with the strongest announcement coming from China, who stated it would ratify by September in advance of the G20, and would ask other G20 countries do so as well. In conjunction with China’s announcement that it will work to peak its GHG emissions by 2030, this strongly reaffirms the country’s continued desire to be a leader in this process. This is paralleled by the United States, who also spoke strongly about its commitment to strong domestic action and prompt ratification.

Continued high-level political moments will be essential for the implementation of the Paris Agreement

The high-level events in the run-up to COP21—be they international (e.g. the high-level Climate Week in September 2014, the 2015 ministerial meetings), bilateral (e.g. the US-China joint announcements in 2014 and 2015), or somewhere in between (e.g. the 2015 G7 summit)—each played essential roles in creating a favorable political context that allowed for an ambitious Paris Agreement to be successfully negotiated and adopted at the end of COP21. By allowing countries to ‘take the temperature’ at a political level (in addition to the technical level of the negotiations) on where countries stood on their desire to act on climate change, these high-level events were essential for building trust among countries and a collective commitment to address climate change. While this first collective action challenge has been overcome, an even larger one remains. Countries indeed still need to build collective trust that their peers and partner countries are committed to now implement their INDCs, and to put their economies on a path toward [deep decarbonization](#) by 2050. It is also essential that, for the trust of developing countries—who in the Paris Agreement have agreed to many changes from the past 20 years of negotiations—to be maintained, developed countries demonstrate that they will keep their promise to deliver USD 100 billion by 2020, and the 100 billion floor from 2020 agreed at COP21. Thus, high-level events that allow countries to assess the seriousness of their peers in moving in this direction are essential in the post-COP21 phase, as they can have the power of creating shifts in countries’ behavior. This begs the question—what will the next high-level events be after this symbolic highly attended signature ceremony? The facilitative dialogue of 2018 comes to mind as the next important high-level UNFCCC meeting, at which countries will meet to take stock of progress made so far on climate action. Yet presently no high-level event is planned for 2017. One

possibility could be to have a G20 event that focuses on helping prepare at the political level the facilitative dialogue, in this way complementing the technical negotiations on this topic that are likely to start at the UNFCCC negotiating session later this month.

Importance of implementation at international and national scales

The Bonn negotiating session in late May will also be the next moment to ‘take the temperature’ of the Paris Agreement implementation process. It indeed provides an opportunity to assess how the continued political consensus on climate action manifested at the signature ceremony percolates down to this meeting, in which country delegates are to start elaborating the Agreement’s technical details. A telling element will be whether the negotiations on the design of the transparency system—which binds countries to biannually submit information on the implementation progress toward their commitments—are carried out smoothly or are dominated by attempts to re-negotiate the Paris *acquis* (i.e. the new more greatly nuanced differentiation between developed and developing countries when it comes to reporting and review obligations). Presently, though, the most important priority should be the launch of domestic implementation of each INDC (which will become an NDC once a country ratifies the Agreement). To reach their commitments, and to raise their climate ambition over time, countries should indeed start now adopting climate laws and developing and unrolling policies to inflect emission curves and set the foundations for a transition toward deep decarbonization. The collective action challenge on undertaking ambitious climate action, and the important role high-level political visibility can have in building trust and countering these fears thus raises an important question of what type of event or mechanism could be developed to help track and demonstrate concrete progress.
