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Adaptation: the other success of COP21

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It is acknowledged that COP21 was a success, first because all countries played the game of the intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs), and second because the negotiators agreed on the very ambitious goal of limiting global warming to less than 2°C by the end of the century, or even 1.5°C (relative to the late 19th century).

However, another success of COP21 went unnoticed, despite being a major step forward for the future of our societies. Indeed, the Paris Agreement invites the international community to develop a “global goal on adaptation”. This is an important turning point in the climate negotiations, reflecting growing international awareness of the need to go beyond the historical issue of financing adaptation in the countries of the South by the countries of the North.

The problem is more fundamental: the “less than +2°C or even +1.5°C” goal, which marked discussions on the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions, can only be considered desirable if societies can adapt to the inevitable impacts of this warming, even if it falls below high emissions scenarios such as the IPCC’s RCP8.5, which would lead to warming in the order of +4°C. In other words, the pursuit of a sustainable future cannot be limited to measuring progress on mitigation, and another question needs to be answered: “are we, as humankind, on the path to adaptation?” This is what the Paris Agreement indirectly proposes when it suggests conducting a “global stocktake” of progress on adaptation. Now that the first step has been taken, the challenge concerns arrangements for this exercise at the global level. Such an exercise is problematic, especially because it has to comply with the principle of “national circumstances”, under which the specific situations of each country must be recognised. This is a key point enabling buy-in of the global process by all Parties.

In an [article published on June 10 in the journal *Science*](#), IDDRI identified three challenges facing the post-2015 climate negotiations.

- First, a shared vision must be developed between all countries around what “adaptation” actually means. Far from the scientific community’s conceptual discussions, the aim here is to promote a relatively simple vision whose primary goal will be to act as a political attractor, to cement talks between countries. This was the case for mitigation: the emergence of a global goal on mitigation, in the form of the +2°C objective in Copenhagen, and now the “less than +2°C” target in Paris, has gradually boosted mitigation dynamics in the different countries. The INDCs, however imperfect, are one of the outcomes of this. Adaptation needs this kind of “vision”, one that is both understandable (politically and scientifically) and operational.
- Measuring country progress on adaptation is a second challenge. A precondition for this is defining a set of indicators enabling every country – as is the case for mitigation – to report its progress and difficulties in light of its national specificities. Once aggregated, these national reports will enable a global assessment, which will itself help to answer the previous question: are we on the path to adaptation? Should these indicators be defined by the scientific community or by the negotiation community? This point can be argued, but one thing is certain: these indicators will only make sense if they are both politically acceptable (country appropriation) and scientifically robust (coherent in relation to climate impacts).
- The final challenge consists in anticipating political obstacles that could affect the scoping process for this global goal on adaptation. For example, some developing countries could be reluctant to report on their progress in implementing adaptation, depending on how this progress is viewed and addressed by the international community: should financial support be prioritised for countries that have made the least progress, or rather encouraged for those showing more promising results? Another example is that a developed country might be reluctant to join the process for fear that the results will give sub-national levels grounds to call for greater efforts from their governments, or even compensation.

Once again, as shown by the history of mitigation in climate negotiations, a global approach must be adopted and political obstacles removed. In this context, science has an important role to play by demonstrating the relevance of an international framework for cooperation on adaptation and through an in-depth analysis – as yet in its infancy – of the impacts of non-adaptation or maladaptation at country level and beyond national borders.