

Are COPs Helping the Battle against Climate Change?

Article by Benjamin Joyeux, Stefan Aykut

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The next annual United Nations climate conference, COP 26, will be held in Glasgow, Scotland, under the UK's presidency in partnership with Italy, in early November. The conference takes place a year later than planned, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. International climate policy expert Stefan Aykut takes stock of the COP process since the Paris Agreement in 2015 and tells Benjamin Joyeux why the success of the upcoming conference should be judged on its capacity to foster connections rather than to establish binding governance.

Benjamin Joyeux: Where are we in the COP process since the Paris Agreement was signed in September 2015?

Stefan Aykut: First of all, it is important to understand the spirit of the Paris Agreement. The Paris framework was born out of a desire to put the global governance process back on track after the total collapse of the negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009, and also from a desire to redefine the scope of this governance, to rethink what we can do and cannot do at the global level, in the presence of all the countries in the world. This was a real paradigm shift compared to what had prevailed until then with the [Kyoto Protocol](#).

Since Paris, binding reductions targets for countries are no longer set, as was previously the case. Instead, we have a clear objective to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees, preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius, compared to pre-industrial levels. This translates into the need to achieve total decarbonisation of human activity by 2050. Next, we see the creation of a kind of "theatre of transparency". States are obliged to submit national commitments, whose content they can freely determine, and transparency mechanisms then serve to foster regular public discussion of the actions implemented by each signatory of the agreement. This discussion must allow for a later assessment of whether the actions are sufficient or not. Thus, the COPs remain important in terms of the gradual establishment of rules for the public discussion of efforts, country by country. This could be seen in particular in Katowice, Poland, [at COP 24 in 2018](#). A whole package of measures was put in place there, including the "[Paris rulebook](#)", which defines what needs to be put on the table in terms of national communication and country-by-country reporting, along with the differences between developed and developing countries, and the implementation of each country's climate action plans, called Nationally Determined Contributions (or NDCs), and so on. All of this architecture has been put in place and negotiations are ongoing, particularly concerning Article 6 of the Paris Agreement protocol on market mechanisms for greenhouse gas emissions, which is still the subject of intensive discussion.

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But in general, these negotiations are becoming less important as the system is beginning to be put in place and it is the transnational mega-event aspect that is becoming fundamental. States, multinationals, the media, and NGOs meet at the great get-togethers that the COPs have become, to discuss climate policies. But the meetings are also used to stage this theatre of transparency, where states submit their climate policies – reductions, adaptation and financing – to the critical gaze of the international community.

Greenhouse gas emissions - counted in PPM (parts per million) of CO₂ in the atmosphere - have risen each year since 2015. If we simply look at the figures, we do not seem to be on a good trajectory at all. Aren't COPs just a chance for governments to pretend they're doing something?

It is a legitimate question. But what we should look at is mainly the emissions, not the PPM. The PPM figure will continue to rise for a long time to come, no matter what we do. CO₂ stays in the atmosphere for a century, so looking at the PPM does not make much sense. However, it is also true that emissions continue to rise.

Today international governance is not the place where the decisions are made; national policies are decisive. International governance remains irreplaceable. It keeps the climate on the agenda and provides for emergency warnings and a general direction. COPs are the only place where all countries – developed, developing, and the poorest – meet every year to discuss the climate together. But even if they are essential, we should not expect them to produce the most important decisions. Those are rather taken by individual states or coalitions of states in bilateral or multilateral initiatives on the margins of UN governance. For example, technological partnerships are necessary and possible in specific areas such as renewable energies, the exit from fossil fuel, international air and maritime transport, and financial regulation. Without such initiatives, the COP dynamic risks sinking into a kind of perpetual round of promises, where leaders make annual promises and then forget them. Alongside this flexible governance at COP, we need concrete agreements too.

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But are states really the right interlocutors if we are to succeed in cutting greenhouse gases? Large multinationals have a much greater impact on climate change than many small states. Isn't COP just a chance for multinationals to greenwash their businesses and get some cheap PR?

Since Paris, different kinds of actors are increasingly involved: large cities, companies, and federal states (including American ones under Donald Trump) have increasingly taken part in COP discussions. The inclusion of private actors was always intended by the architects of the Paris Agreement. But it is not without its problems.

Multinationals are key players in the fight against climate change, but COPs are mainly a communication platform for them. For example, at each COP there is now the UN Global Climate Action Prize to reward corporate and civil society initiatives. In 2019, Apple was among the recipients. In 2020, it was Dallas airport! A massive marketing and PR platform is made available for companies that are not necessarily pro-climate. At the same time, the international process does contribute to forging new legal norms. Climate court cases are currently taking shape around the world, including Notre Affaire à Tous in France, the recent complaint before the German constitutional court, and the Urgenda case in the Netherlands. In these cases, plaintiffs are suing governments and companies to force them to redouble their efforts to reduce emissions or to compensate for the damage caused. All of these cases rely on texts from international governance as the basis for their arguments.

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So the COPs make it easier for people to take up the climate cause?

Absolutely! COPs should be thought of mainly as spaces of convergence, for the circulation of know-how, whether in terms of emissions reduction or legal argumentation. The Paris Agreement is constantly cited and the 1.5 degree limit is pointed to in all these recent court cases. We are no longer looking at binding governance but rather at a convergence of several dynamics, still insufficient but in which we can make out trajectories, connections, and synergies. For example, a recent report on coal-fired power plants under construction around the world showed that since the Paris Agreement, three quarters of the power plants that were initially planned have not been built.

There is a change underway around energy planning in many countries but it will not be enough. What remains crucial is the bottom-up movement of civil society that has been emerging over the last few years: Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, court cases launched by citizens and associations, certain companies that are taking the lead, states that are implementing more ambitious policies. These different actions must reach a critical mass so as to reinforce each other. This is ultimately what the COPs should be judged on: do they help these different dynamics to link up to move more quickly towards the decarbonisation of human activity?

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But don't COPs fail to discuss the paradigm that is at the root of what is preventing us from effectively fighting climate change - the dogma of growth? Within international conferences, one often gets the impression that growth is even more important than saving the planet.

The dogma of growth does not come from the United Nations; it is deeply rooted in our national political and economic systems, and also in the ideas that shape development patterns around the world. It is often countries of the South that insist that climate policies not be used against their interests in trade negotiations. They fear that the environment will be a pretext for curbing their development and want to separate questions about their development strategies from environmental issues.

That said, the dogma of growth is a problem. We need to redefine what "growth" means and how it contributes to a good life for the majority. Growth in itself is not necessarily a problem. But measuring it in GDP is problematic. It is a very poor indicator for many reasons. But today this isn't a matter to be articulated in international conferences or at a UN forum. The question of growth must clearly be put on the table at the national level: what would be a just society and how would our various systems (democracy, social security, and so on) function without growth. We should debate the issue of growth first at the national and then at the European level. If we manage to show that prosperity without GDP growth is possible, we could then discuss it internationally. But we're not going to discuss post-growth with India. It wouldn't make sense in the current state of affairs.

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A new Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty has been put on the table by thousands of scientists and academics from around the world. Is a treaty like this likely to succeed in the current international system?

When Amy Dahan and I published Gouverner le Climat in 2015, one of our hypotheses was that focusing on CO2 alone in climate policies carried the risk of depoliticising the issues by making them too abstract. We felt it was necessary to give a more region-focused and concrete dimension to the transition: to discuss CO2 emissions at the end of the chain but also the chain itself - this "fossil capitalism" that needs to be transformed. In particular, a debate is needed on the nature of our energy production and the hydrocarbon trade. These discussions were already topical at the time. And now we have this initiative for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. Unfortunately, I don't think it will be at the heart of the discussions in Glasgow. But it's an idea that absolutely has to grow and become more important. It does not necessarily need to be negotiated as part of the Paris Agreement and the COPs. It might be more effective to move forward with a small group of willing countries, before expanding the circle. Because one of the problems of international governance is precisely that all countries are around the table. Negotiating such a treaty

with Saudi Arabia, Australia, or the United States has little chance of succeeding unless it loses its binding nature. We therefore need agreements and initiatives of this type, complementary to the Paris Agreement. Another text might concern specific industrial sectors, such as cement or steel. The idea is to have initiatives in these sectors that could create a global transition of such industries towards decarbonisation. Here again, it is not vital that this be done under the Paris Agreement. We can make progress in the form of bilateral or multilateral negotiations, and think about integration into the UN framework later.

Are carbon quotas and, more generally, market mechanisms effective for regulating greenhouse gas emissions?

If we look at Europe, its carbon market is starting to work for the first time in years. The carbon price is, in certain industries, making pollution more expensive. But – and this is essential – it is not because the market is doing things well, but mainly because things have moved politically. Companies are beginning to believe that the European Commission and the member states are serious about their desire to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. They think that in the future there will be fewer allowances and therefore that the price of the allowances will increase. It is the value of political credibility. This is why a carbon market can contribute to the fight against climate change, but only in its proper and humble way.

Carbon markets must be accompanied by an arsenal of measures including support for renewables and ambitious infrastructure policies such as the development of rail and public transport. It is important to note that this market took 15 years to work in Europe, with a large bureaucracy and solid institutions. And despite this, there have been many criminal abuses. Billions of euros were stolen during the first phase. Imagine these carbon markets internationally, in a context of weak regulation and without any institution with real oversight powers. The risk is of creating huge loopholes. We see this with the [Clean Development Mechanism](#) created under Kyoto. All the studies conducted afterwards agree that this mechanism did not help to significantly reduce global emissions.

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What international mechanism could then work to really lower our CO2 emissions?

We can think in terms of bilateral aid and investments in projects. A market mechanism can only work with strong institutions to oversee and support it, allowing for clear comparability in terms of emissions in different countries and so on. One of the things we know best and that works, more or less, is development aid. We need to transform investment policies in developing countries – everything that is financed by governments, the World Bank, and multilateral development banks. There is enormous room for manoeuvre here, as these

banks often continue to invest in fossil fuels. Changing the investment policies of these institutions is urgent and necessary to move towards decarbonisation in infrastructure, which can last for decades. There are real levers here independent of carbon markets.

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Finally, what can we expect from COP 26 in Glasgow?

In Glasgow, we will continue to discuss the final details of the Paris Agreement, particularly Article 6. We are already looking forward to the USA returning to the table. At that point, we can hope for joint announcements with China and other states. This is also the last year for the submission of Nationally Determined Contributions [national plans for emissions cuts]. Many countries have not yet submitted their plans. More countries will submit binding targets and more precise climate strategies for 2050 at Glasgow.

Personally, I do not expect a major announcement at COP 26. The COPs remain important as occasions where the climate is discussed globally. They also provide tools and resources that can be used in national policy debates and in court. They must be used as a means of pressure, to say: “This is what you promised and it is not enough”. The COPs are opportunities that must be seized upon but what we need most of all is the pressure. The climate movement and civil society needs to regain its strength, now that the Covid crisis is fading. In 2019, just before the pandemic, there was a global climate movement emerging everywhere. We need that bottom-up pressure to make itself felt. Change will come from there. It will not be decreed at a COP.

Translation: Harry Bowden | Voxeurop



Benjamin Joyeux is a lawyer, ecologist, libertarian, and anti-globalisation activist. He was a communications advisor to the French speaking delegation of Green members of the European Parliament; and is the co-author, with Edouard Gaudot, of *l'Europe C'est Nous* (Les Petits Matins, April 2014).



Stefan Aykut, professor of sociology at the University of Hamburg, specialises in international climate policies. He is the co-author of *Gouverner le Climat? 20 ans de négociations internationales* (Presses de Sciences Po, 2015) and *Climatiser le Monde* (Editions Quae, 2020).

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