

## WHY THE UNITED NATIONS CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS FAIL?

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### Abstract

*This study, at first, puts light on the expectation-reality check of climate initiatives particularly through retrospection of COPs, 1 to 20, and finds out that the success is still marginal. It discovers that four specific reasons make climate negotiation initiatives fail or at least lengthen. The first one is the immoderate number of the polygonal issues, which inspires unstable positions and fluid coalitions. Geopolitical bloc alignment of the acting stakeholders is the next one and because of the variegated mutually exclusive nature of the interests, the blocs fluctuate. Thirdly, too many meetings that prompt fights and frequent modifications of agenda and often undemocratic and consensus-based decisions make UNFCCC negotiation mechanism less adaptive, which also lacks legally binding authority. Finally, the effects of domestic power politics and persuasion of the corporate world make international climate agreements tough for the national governments.*

### INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the then chair of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Rajendra Pachauri, counseled, “If there’s no action (on climate change) before 2012, that’s too late. What we do in the next two to three years will determine our future. This is the defining moment”.<sup>1</sup> Eight years later, a few days before the Earth Day, U.S. President Barak Obama hoped that, as world’s two largest economies (i.e. China and USA) came together, the world would “reach an agreement to prevent the worst impacts of climate change before it’s too late”.<sup>2</sup>

Eight invaluable years have passed and the world is still waiting for a viable change in the international climate regime. Over these years, the world has seen some considerably alarming kaleidoscopic indications of climate change, which

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Jhonston, ‘Transformative Environmental Education: Stepping Outside the Curriculum Box’, *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2009, pp. 149-57.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Wolfgang, ‘Obama: U.S. must secure global climate-change deal ‘before it’s too late’’, *The Washington Times*, April 18, 2015.

is constantly reminding us that climate change is no longer a subject affordable to be overlooked.

In Cancún, during COP 2010, a delegate, Ambassador Adrian Macey, expressed his frustration, “Finally, Chair, if I permit myself a personal note, we have had three years of negotiations and one agreed paragraph”.<sup>3</sup> The scenario has not changed even after four years in Lima, when we discovered that the negotiators have agreed upon a text with at least five alternatives in every paragraph.<sup>4</sup> COP 20 in Lima initially started with an enthusiastic spirit since the COP 15 held in Copenhagen. It was because the two largest carbon emitters of the world, USA and China, who effectively agreed to convert their economies into ‘low carbon’ ones just before the conference. EU, Brazil, South Africa and even *skeptic* Australia announced radical actions in favor of climate change negotiations prior to the conference. Just after the beginning of the negotiation, everybody discovered that it was the exact recap of the previous COPs and all the enthusiasm disappeared into oblivion. The statement of a journalist, Geoffrey Lean<sup>5</sup> might be noted, “One key session, for example, was held up for four days while delegates debated whether the text of the document they were working on should or should not, be displayed on a giant electronic screen in the meeting room.”

After reviewing the history of international climate change negotiations, especially the attempts of UNFCCC which have been prevailed for the past twenty years in this arena, this article attempts to establish four prevalent reasons responsible for prolonged UN climate change negotiations. However, analysis on COP 21, Paris is not within the scope of this article, and prescribing a solution for an effective climate agreement is not included within the objectives of it as well.

### **CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS: A BACKDROP**

The history of international climate negotiations is still evolving<sup>6</sup> and it has been told repeatedly in different books, papers, reports and conference

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<sup>3</sup> Antto Vihma and Kati Kulovesi, *Strengthening Global Climate Change Negotiations: Improving the Efficiency of the UNFCCC Process*. Nordiske Arbejdspapirer Nordic Working Papers. Nordic Council of Ministers, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Falk, ‘The world can’t afford more Limas’, *Aljazeera America*. December 20, 2014, available at: <<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/12/lima-climate-change-conference-unitednationsgreenhousegasemissions.html>> (accessed on May 26, 2015)

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Lean, ‘How the Lima Climate Change Talks Failed’, *The Telegraph*, December 15, 2014. available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/earth/11293478/How-the-Lima-climate-change-talks-failed.html>> (accessed on May 14, 2015)

<sup>6</sup> J. Timmons Roberts, ‘Multipolarity and the New World (Dis)order: US Hegemonic Decline and the Fragmentation of the Global Climate Change’, *Global Environmental Change*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2010, pp. 776-84.

procedures<sup>7</sup>. This section lays out some of the most significant events to have a better understanding of international climate negotiations.

Greenhouse gases (GHG) have always been some important elements of our atmosphere, though apparently not so *popularly important* like Oxygen, Hydrogen or Nitrogen. However, the effects of GHG on atmosphere were revealed only after huge emission of such gases, which resulted from industrial revolution in the beginning of nineteenth century, to a level that the civilization had never encountered. Probably this dramatic change of atmosphere and subsequent changes of climate encouraged Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius to anticipate the possible results of unusually increased anthropogenic emissions of GHG and in 1896, he presented his greenhouse warming theory.<sup>8</sup> After that, the world saw a surge of scientific viewpoints, evidences and arguments, especially in the 50s and 60s of the twentieth century, in favor of the responsibility of CO<sub>2</sub> behind the increased global warming. The improvements in computing powers in the next two decades increased the confidence of the scientists to deliver accurate global warming predictions than before.<sup>9</sup> However, the attempt of scientists to construct the climate change phenomena as an agent of forthcoming apocalypse faced some fundamental disagreements. One of the strong factors behind this disagreement was "...climate change... entered the international agenda through an abstract theoretical awareness rather than an actual experience of its consequences".<sup>10</sup> Despite some disagreements and oppositions, during 1960s and 1970s, a public awareness on climate change grew strongly.<sup>11</sup> Within next two decades, a scientific discourse became a subject of social movement. The emergence of scientific concern and subsequent public awareness certainly helped to establish a ground for upcoming climate negotiations in national and international levels.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Bodansky, 'The History of Global Climate Change Regime' in Urs Luterbacher and Detlef F. Sprinz (eds.), *International Relations and Global Climate Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001, pp. 23-40; Luterbacher, Urs and Detlef F. Sprinz, *International Relations and Global Climate Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010; Bolin, Bert, *A History of the Science and Politics of Climate Change: The Role of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Andrew Jamison, 'Climate Change Knowledge and Social Movement Theory', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 2010, pp. 811-23; Joyeeta Gupta, *The History of Global Climate Governance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Svante Arrhenius, 'On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground', *Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science*, Vol. 41, No. 251, 1896, pp. 237-76; Daniel Bodansky, 2001, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Bodansky, 2001, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Joyeeta Gupta, 2014, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Jamison, 'Climate Change Knowledge and Social Movement Theory', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, Vol. 1, No. 6, 2010, pp. 811-23.