

COP Out

Why Paris won't deliver and what we need instead

May 2015



COP 21 Paris: the no hope summit

Climate change is already hitting the world's poorest people hardest and it needs to be stopped. The responsibility for the climate crisis lies squarely on the shoulders of the rich, whose consumption and greed has driven us to the brink of disaster. This makes it a problem of social and economic justice.

Some groups consider the upcoming Paris climate summit to be the answer.

Campaign messages exhorting us to take action over the UN climate summit include '24 months to save the world' and 'show David Cameron our love'. Progressive newspapers and blogs carry a similar message of false hope. The Paris summit, a recent Guardian's editorial argues, is 'the world's last, best chance' to combat climate change.

The bad news is that the Paris Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) won't work because it will not be dealing with the underlying problem – the unfair economic system that puts the interest of fossil fuel addicted corporations above those of the people.

Climate change will never be solved through negotiations dominated by corporate interests. Many of the same governments that are supposedly fighting climate change in Paris are also pushing corporate trade deals like the EU-US trade deal, TTIP, that will benefit the fracking industry and supporting big agribusiness companies that undermine the ability of farmers to adapt to climate change. As this briefing explains, these same governments use bullying and bribery tactics to ensure that the interests of their corporate friends takes precedence over the fight against climate change.

So we already know that the Paris COP will be a cop-out at best, and actually damaging at worst. Just as in 2009, when the climate summit branded

as 'Hopenhagen' collapsed into farce, any agreement reached in Paris is destined to be an unambitious fudge.

So instead of being distracted by the false hope of a summit breakthrough, we should concentrate on putting pressure on our politicians to reduce emissions at home and building a broad and diverse movement to change the political context of climate policy. This means fighting trade deals that bestow rights on fossil fuel corporations. It means fighting the politics of austerity that forces us to accept 'cheap' coal instead of investing in clean, democratically controlled energy systems. And it also means fighting against the privatisation of energy globally.

Bullying and bribery: how the rich countries get their way

Not all countries have equal clout at the talks. The richest countries are also the biggest polluters and therefore tend to be in a position to dictate the terms of debate. Unlike some low income countries, the industrialised countries can afford to run a PR machine that churns out their message and come to the talks with teams of hundreds of negotiators, diplomats, lawyers and media officers.

In addition, rich countries use an array of dirty tricks to ensure they get their way.

Excluding those who disagree

One of the most commonly used of these underhand tactics is exclusion.

Although all 196 countries that are parties to the UNFCCC send delegations, not all of them are allowed to be actively involved in the negotiation process.

In practice, the formal procedures are bypassed as rich countries set up parallel informal negotiations with countries that are likely to agree with them, excluding those who are likely to disagree (most often the poor countries). These 'agreements' are

then presented to everyone else as a 'take it or leave it' deal.

These 'green room' negotiations happen behind closed doors and most developing country delegations are unaware of them until they finish.

This tactic was used to great effect during the catastrophic Copenhagen climate summit in 2009. The Danish delegation drafted what would become the infamously unambitious 'Copenhagen Accord' in secret negotiations with just 26 other (mostly rich) countries, all the while denying that such talks were even taking place. The excluded delegations were then given just one hour to read the document which superseded two years of official negotiations.

The same tactic has been used at every subsequent summit, including at Durban in 2011 when the decision was made to delay any meaningful agreement until Paris in 2015.

There is no chance that Paris will be any different. In fact, this time the big countries are rigging the deal before the talks have even started to make absolutely certain that no real action is taken. The criminally unambitious bilateral deal between the US and China will mean that the summit is almost certainly destined to fail months before it will open.

Lost in translation

Another more subtle, but nevertheless effective tactic is holding meetings in English without translation. While the formal negotiations offer translation, the backroom side-meeting where most of the real action takes place are often English-only, putting delegations with less strong English language abilities at a disadvantage.

Death by meetings

Another way that rich countries and some of the bigger emerging economies manage to cut out the poorer countries is by choking off the process

with parallel meetings. Low income countries can often ill afford to bring more than a handful of delegates to climate conferences, while rich countries often have hundreds of delegates. For example, South Sudan, Serbia and Somalia were all represented by just one delegate each at the last COP in Lima, while the USA had almost 100 delegates. At one point during the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks, there were 26 meetings taking place simultaneously.

Spying

Secret documents leaked by former CIA agent Edward Snowden has revealed that the US was spying on other delegations at the Copenhagen talks in 2009. At the time, a developing country delegate said that he would only talk in a room where they were sure they weren't being bugged, commenting that the US delegation 'seemed to know what our position was before we did'. It's highly possible that this sort of eavesdropping by the US and other countries with powerful intelligence services will happen at Paris as well.

Bribery and threats

More powerful countries are in a position to threaten poorer countries with repercussions if they vote the wrong way.

But rich country delegations use the carrot as well as the stick in their negotiations. Individual countries can often get picked off by the richer countries, accepting short term sweeteners in exchange for support for an unambitious deal that's soft on rich countries. This happened on an industrial scale at the Durban summit in 2011, where African countries were offered aid in exchange for concessions in what was dubbed 'chequebook diplomacy'.

During the Copenhagen summit in 2009, French President Nicolas Sarkozy did a bilateral deal with Ethiopia to get them to back an unfair EU deal. This

The US-China deal

Last year, the mainstream media celebrated a 'breakthrough' deal between the world's two biggest carbon emitters. But despite this being celebrated as good news for the Paris summit, the reality doesn't live up to the hype. In fact, the deal is a disaster and pretty much dooms Paris to failure. The US agreed to a target of 26-28% reductions on 2005 levels by 2025. That sounds OK but actually only translates to a 15-17%

cut on the internationally accepted base year of 1990. That is nowhere near enough to stop dangerous climate change (a fair cut would be at least 60% per cent on 1990 levels by 2030). As for China, it agreed to peak emissions by 2030, something that some analysts believe would happen anyway as Chinese growth slows and coal becomes less economical. In short, both the US and China have agreed to continue with something close to business as usual emissions until 2030.



Protestors on the streets of Copenhagen in 2009

was then presented as Africa as a whole agreeing to the European proposal despite the fact that no other African country was closely involved in the deal.

Sometimes bullying and bribery aims at excluding particular individuals from delegations. For example, in 2014, the Philippines' chief climate negotiator Yeb Saño was dropped from the country's delegation allegedly after pressure from rich countries to side-line a strong critic of their policies.

Corporate takeover

The COPs have changed a lot since the landmark Kyoto summit in 1997. Back then, it was an argument between using 'cap and trade' market based mechanisms to fight climate change or having a greater role for regulation. Now, the centre of debate has shifted to a situation where we are stuck talking about failed market based solutions. At the time, activists derided Kyoto as being insufficient. Now, even a Kyoto-type agreement, with legally binding, meaningful carbon cuts on rich countries, seems almost out of reach. How did things get so bad?

The most important factor in the hobbling of ambition at the UN climate negotiations are the people who don't have a single delegation officially, but in practice exert undue control on almost everyone there – the corporate sector.

Since the 1990s, big corporations, most notably those in the oil and gas, mining, banking and agricultural sectors, have been lobbying hard. The fossil fuel companies try to shift the conversation

away from an end to fossil fuels and towards false solutions such as carbon capture and storage which allow them to continue business as usual. The financial sector and private sector energy companies are also trying (very successfully) to get a slice of the money earmarked for helping poor countries mitigate and adapt to climate change.

This has meant that much climate finance is being channelled through the financial sector. The UK has been instrumental in pushing for the creation of a private sector facility (PSF) as part of the UN Green Climate Fund (GCF) which is meant to become the main channel for rich countries to disburse climate finance. While developing countries want the PSF to focus on supporting small green businesses, the UK wants PSF money to be channelled through financial intermediaries (including big private sector banks) to big corporate projects.

At the Warsaw COP in 2013, this corporate takeover reached new heights when the Polish hosts set up a conference for big coal companies right next to the main summit. Activists at the summit were shocked to hear 'clean coal' being promoted as a large part of the solution to climate change. And as if to add insult to injury, Poland's environment minister was sacked halfway through the summit because he was too slow in allowing fracking in the country.

While it's unlikely that the French will be as brazen in promoting the fossil fuel industry at the Paris summit, the power of the fossil fuel and financial sectors is likely to ensure that big business will receive much of any climate finance promised to the Green Climate Fund at the talks.

Undermining previous agreements

Since the inception of the UNFCCC process more than 20 years ago, a number of key principles have underpinned the negotiation process.

The most important of these is the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). This is the recognition that because the rich countries of the global north have historically emitted far more carbon dioxide than southern countries, the burden of carbon cuts should fall primarily on the richer countries. The principle also means that rich countries must compensate southern countries for the fact that they cannot use as much fossil fuel by paying the additional cost of using new renewables technology and by paying the cost of adapting to the effects of climate change.

CBDR is hard-wired into the UNFCCC system by the division of all countries into two groups – annex I (industrialised countries) and annex II (poor countries).

But for many years now, rich countries, especially the USA, have been trying to undermine this system so that southern countries are made to 'share the burden' of fighting climate change. This is fundamentally unfair as, for example, on a per person, the USA emits over 44 times more than Bangladesh, a country that could end up being largely underwater as a result of climate change.

For rich countries, Paris is an opportunity to get rid of CBDR and move to a system where poor countries have to sign up to binding targets as well.

Rich countries argue that CBDR has become outdated because since the early 1990s developing countries' emissions have increased. But while Chinese per person emissions have caught up with Europe's (partly because it produces consumer products for Western markets) no other developing country has per person emissions equivalent to that of countries in Europe and North America. Even India's per

person emissions are just a tenth of those of the USA. So while there is a genuine argument to be had about whether China should take on more responsibility than countries with very low emissions, abandoning the principle of CBDR is dangerous as it is likely to allow the established rich countries to blame southern countries for a problem they largely caused themselves.

So what do we do?

The Paris COP is not going to save the world. But that doesn't mean that there is nothing we can do. By concentrating on piling pressure on our own governments and corporations – the UK is still one of the world's biggest per capita emitters – we have a better chance of achieving tangible progress towards climate justice.

That's not to say that we should abandon the summits completely – they are useful places to mobilise civil society and express popular protest against the damaging policies of our governments. But it is time for activists and campaigners across the world to realise that the system is rigged against us and that progress will only be made if the governments that represent us feel the pressure for change from below.

However, this kind of climate campaigning is unlikely to work in the context of an economic system that is geared towards the interests of a few high-carbon corporations. We need to go beyond seeing the fight against climate change as something we do during big summits or around issues such as airport expansion. The reality is that the climate battle is going on in parts of government policy that aren't usually associated with climate change such as tax, trade policy, the privatisation of public services and agriculture. If we succeed in fighting corporate control in these areas we will also be destroying the economic system that is feeding climate change, freeing up government to concentrate on the best ways of reducing emissions without having to kowtow to these strong vested interests.

Take action

To find out how you can help tackle corporate power and become part of a movement for real change visit www.globaljustice.org.uk or call 020 7820 4900.



Global Justice Now campaigns for a world where resources are controlled by the many, not the few, and works in solidarity with social movements to fight injustice. We used to be the World Development Movement.

Global Justice Now, 66 Offley Road, London SW9 0LS

t: 020 7820 4900 e: offleyroad@globaljustice.org.uk w: www.globaljustice.org.uk