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Celebrating the Paris Agreement at COP21. Photo by IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth

It is two years since COP21 negotiated the Paris Agreement, a legally binding agreement to work towards limiting global temperature increases. The ambitious goals were to keep global temperatures at well below 2ºC above pre-industrial levels, and to make strong efforts to keep the rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The Paris agreement on climate change came into force in November last year, meaning that all governments that have ratified the accord now have a legal obligation to keep global warming to no more than 2ºC.

So what has happened in the year since then?

The reality of climate change

The devastating hurricane season and the effects on the US and Caribbean has opened many eyes to the reality of climate change. In a significant shift of opinion, a majority of Americans say that global climate change contributed to the severity of recent hurricanes in Florida and Texas, according to a new Washington Post-ABC News poll.

In Fiji and other Pacific countries, the cost of climate change is already well known. As the Fijian Prime Minister and incoming COP23 President Frank Bainimarama has said: 'Unless we tackle the underlying causes of climate change, we already know that some places will become unlivable and others will disappear altogether.'

Will the Paris Agreement tackle climate change?

The 2015 Paris Agreement is just that. An agreement. Whether it succeeds in 'holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels' will depend on whether countries move a whole lot further and faster than they have already pledged to do.

Enter COP23, the next round of multinational climate talks, which takes place in Bonn from the 6th to the 17th of November 2017.

COP23's president is Fiji's Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama. His vision for COP23 is for it to be transparent and inclusive of all, that it advances the Paris Agreement and that it forges a grand coalition to accelerate climate action before 2020.

This is an exciting vision. Something to hope, pray and take action for! It will not be easy – the fossil fuel industry attend these conferences in force, and are unlikely to push for policies that bring forward their demise. The call from those of us who rate a sustainable earth higher than their sustainable profits will need to to be equally forceful. 350.org will update you on the talks and how to call for action.

The latest climate science

In September, climate scientists Myles Allen and Richard Millar published a paper in the scientific journal Nature Geoscience that, using one particular set of data, worked out how much carbon dioxide we can emit and still retain some hope of achieving the Paris goals. Their findings gave some cause for optimism, concluding that it is still possible to achieve the Paris ambition – although it remains, they said, 'a formidable challenge'.

Predictably, some media commentators took this as support for their own agenda, causing Allen and Millar to respond, 'When media sceptics misrepresent our climate research we must speak out.'

Allen and Millar acknowledged that their research was also going to be controversial within the scientific community, and so it proved. For example, climatologist Stefan Rahmstorf has questioned some of the methodology.

The differences in opinion between climate scientists hinge on issues such as the size of our 'emissions budget' to keep global warming below the Paris targets, and whether we have a budget at all; and whether these targets are achievable.

But the big question is, as Prof. Rahmstorf puts it in his RealClimate article, 'Does it all matter?' Some of the scientific debate, he says, is 'an academic discussion at best, a distraction at worst'.

The real issue is that 'we need to see falling emissions globally very, very soon if we even want to stay well below 2°C. That was agreed as the weaker goal in Paris in a consensus by 195 nations. It is high time that everyone backs this up with actions, not just words.'

The business case for action on energy

Renewable energy is having a heyday. Each year, the International Energy Agency has to revise up its forecast for renewable capacity, and it currently is expecting a 43% increase over the next 5 years.

There's always lots of talk about how much this will cost and whether low-carbon electricity can still be cheap for consumers. But the flip side to every cost is a revenue – and what has received less attention is the size of the opportunity that will be created for green growth, green jobs and new investment.

More than half the UK's electricity came from low carbon sources this summer, according to the National Grid, making it the 'greenest' summer on record. And offshore wind power is now cheaper than new nuclear energy, with solar power being the fastest-growing source of new energy globally.

Our campaign for church disinvestment, Bright Now, has often discussed what makes an ethical oil company. Well, Danish energy company Ørsted has relaunched itself as a renewable energy company, ditching its old name DONG – originally short for Danish Oil and Natural Gas – because it no longer reflects the business.

The political case for action on climate

As one commenter on the realclimate.org blog said: 'It is worth considering that at this point our salvation lies in putting pressure on the politics rather than in increasingly nuanced climate science discussions ... The matter before us really is how hard can we hit the brakes and how fast politically can we hit them.'

To this end, the pressure group Mission 2020, led by former UN climate change chief Christiana Figueres, was launched in April this year. This group of leading climate and business experts sees the year 2020 as a critical turning point and is calling on businesses, investors and policy-makers to take urgent action in the next three years. Do watch and share their a humorous and inspiring 2-minute video.

Despite the views of the US President, others are taking action. New York City announced in October the first-ever city plan to meet the goals of the Paris climate agreement.

Current commitments by Paris Agreement signatories to cut carbon emissions are not yet enough to keep global warming below the safe threshold, but there is increasing pressure on governments to do more.

In the UK, our 2008 Climate Act, with its long-term goal of cutting greenhouse emissions to 80% below 1990 levels by 2050, is now too weak according to the latest science and the Paris Agreement. The government is facing a legal challenge forcing it to shrink carbon emissions to zero by 2050.

The government's Clean Growth Strategy, its legal requirement to show how it would meet the current Climate Act carbon budget, was released on the 12th October. Despite positive language from government, the plan appears to leave the UK significantly off track achieving its targets, targets that we know are too weak to protect the climate. The body responsible for monitoring the government's adherence to the Climate Act has the formidable task of having to congratulate the government on a strategy that doesn't do what it is legally required to do.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Party has been warned that it risks losing votes from young people unless it is seen to take climate change seriously. We need to work to ensure that any response to this warning consists of implementing radical policies, not minor tweaks to placate the concerned.

So what do we do?

There is currently a huge gap between the Paris Agreement targets on one hand, and national carbon-reduction pledges and company business plans on the other. This gap must be closed. An electorate aware of the urgency and seriousness of the situation must call for the Paris Agreement to be turned into action. Here are some suggestions to help make that happen:

1. Sign up for updates and action suggestions from the upcoming COP23 with 350.org.

2. Travel to Bonn for COP23 or/and the People's Climate summit beforehand.

3. Support Bright Now and divest your church from fossil fuels. The churches in the UK can make a prophetic statement about the crucial need to keep fossil fuels in the ground by committing to divest from all fossil fuels.

4. Write to, or visit, your MP. Hope for the Future is the expert on MP engagement.

5. Sign Renew Our World's open letter to world leaders, calling on them to keep the promises they made in the Paris Agreement.



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