

COP-21: The Target Missed

The world appears to have derived a sigh of relief at the so called monumental success of the 195 participating nations in reaching a deal at Paris to save the earth from catastrophic climate change threatening to cause mass extinction of species, imminent submerging of vast terrestrial areas—even including whole of certain island nations, likely disappearance of innumerable glaciers feeding several perennial rivers and so on. But, this, so called path-breaking deal has still missed the target of capping the temperature-rise of the planet earth at the targeted 1.5° C above the post industrialization era temperature. Despite all the pledges of 'Intended Nationally Determined Contributions' (INDCs) to cut the green house gas (GHG) emissions, submitted in the run up to the COP-21, even if fully honored by the respective countries, the global temperature is likely to rise between 2.7 to 3° C above the pre-industrialization level. The brighter side of the deal is that in the event of lack of even these commitments, obtained after hard bargaining at Paris, the temperatures could shoot up to 4.5 degrees or even beyond 4.5° C by 2100. Another most praise-worthy achievement to rejoice is that all the countries have unanimously agreed for a target of capping the temperature-rise to 1.5° C. It is indeed a big leap to agree for a target of below the 2° C target that was agreed upon by nearly 200 countries, 6 years ago in Copenhagen. However, it should also be borne in mind that the world has already seen a 1° C rise in temperature in the post-industrialization era, and the recent data show no signs of any major fall in the global green house gas (GHG) emissions to restrain warming. Therefore, many of the green groups have rightly commented that the 1.5° C aspiration is meaningless, unless very bold measures are adopted to hit the target.

Still, it is no mean achievement that, at least after these two decades of tough bargaining, the countries of the world could come up with a political consensus to find a solution to the severe threats to the climate with a commonly accepted target. The last major attempt made to bring a consensus in the Copenhagen conference of 2009 was derailed by conflicting stands of the developed and developing countries and an open stubborn and obstructive China, the polluter of the first order. It was only after this new round was launched in 2011, and the Paris outcome is now in hands. This time it became possible only with the change in political leaderships in China, Australia and Canada—viz from Jiabao to Xi Jinping in China, from Steven Harper to Justin Trudeau of Canada and from Tony Abbott to Malcolm Turnbull in Australia.

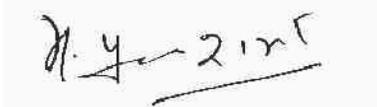
India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi too has announced a bold initiative- the global alliance of 120 countries, committed to the large-scale expansion of solar power. Even Uhuru Kenyatta, the president of Kenya, promised a major investment in renewable energy, notwithstanding the fact that his country contributes less than 0.1% of global emissions. Indeed, every nation had its voice heard at Paris and has contributed according to its capacity.

As per the Paris deal, the developed countries have to "continue taking the lead" by undertaking economy-wide absolute emission reduction targets, while the developing countries too are expected to continue enhancing their mitigation efforts. They were also encouraged at Paris to move over time, towards economy-wide emission reduction or limitation targets depending upon their national circumstances. In the follow up to this deal, the countries have to set national targets for further reducing greenhouse gas emissions every five years. More than 180 countries have already submitted targets for the first cycle beginning in 2020. COP i.e. "Conference of the Parties" has been taking place since the 1992 Rio framework convention, and the Rio Declaration has at least now been ratified by 195 countries. There have been 20 COPs since 1995 — and this is the 21st, or in UN-speak, COP-21, and can be said to be the most successful. In the COP-21 as well, one of the most difficult things to agree upon, was that the largest emitter China was asking for differential requirements for it and is not transparent about its real emissions. Yet, the agreement asserts that all countries must report their emissions as well as their efforts to reduce them. However, it allows for some "flexibility" for developing countries that "need it." Another most contentious issue is how will countries finance their shift towards greener technologies? The agreement says wealthy countries should continue to offer financial support to help poor countries reduce their emissions and adapt to climate change. But, actual dollar amounts are kept out of the agreement itself. The wealthy nations had previously pledged to provide \$100 billion for climate finance by 2020 but, no tangible progress in this regard is visible. This seems to be too small a sum to take care of the problem. Oxfam estimates that the new deal will see developing countries facing adaptation costs of almost \$800 billion a year

by 2050. Likewise, coming to the problems of small island nations threatened by rising seas, the agreement has at least recognized "loss and damage" associated with climate-related disasters. The US had long objected to addressing this issue in the agreement, on the apprehension that it would lead to claims of compensation for damage caused by extreme weather events from the wealthy nation on the count of pollution caused by them. The issue was included with a footnote specifically stating that loss and damage will not invoke any liability or compensation. To sum up on this count of funds and costs, the developing countries have got only words and vague promises of money and the developed countries have finally got rid of their historical responsibility of having caused such huge damage to the environment which caused climate change that has led to the 1°C rise in temperature already out of the 1.5°C target. They have no legally binding targets on finance or emissions cuts, although they are the ones who have mostly polluted the environment till date. The 1997 Kyoto protocol treaty too was supposed to set out legally binding targets for countries to meet specific emissions targets. However, it only applied to wealthy countries that now account for a dwindling share of global emissions, and the US never ratified it, largely because it (i.e. Kyoto protocol) did not require China to cut its pollution. To overcome Kyoto's deficiencies, countries tried to come up with a deal in Copenhagen in 2009, at COP-15. But that effort got thwarted and a new round of negotiations was launched in 2011, aimed at coming up with a new accord in Paris that would require action from all countries, rich and poor. So, it can be said that after Rio de Janeiro and Kyoto, the "UN Framework Convention on Climate Change" (UNFCCC), has made a breakthrough at Paris.

Therefore, the COP-21 of Paris can be termed as a big step ahead, despite the fact that it let the wealthy countries exonerated of their past environmental misdeeds and China, which is the largest emitter of climate warming green house gases, still remained non-committal on curbing its emissions. The commitments obtained till date will lead to 2.7°-3°C of warming against a target of 1.5°C. So, the frequency of calamities and disasters is bound to accelerate, instead of receding.

To conclude, the negotiators have won a deal but humanity and the living world has lost.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Prakash Sharma', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

(Prof. Bhagwati Prakash Sharma)

Editor in chief