

# High pressure for low emissions

## How civil society created the Paris climate agreement

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A huge diplomatic achievement, the Paris agreement signed in late 2015 was also the outcome of an unprecedented show of political power by a broad and diverse coalition of forces from global civil society. **Michael Jacobs** describes how this alliance forced the hands of the world's major polluters, and forged a new politics of climate.

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The international climate change agreement reached in Paris in December 2015 was, as many observers have noted, an extraordinary diplomatic achievement, uniting 195 countries around a highly ambitious agenda to cut greenhouse gas emissions. As others have said, it sends a powerful economic signal, telling the world's businesses and investors that the global economy is set to become increasingly low-carbon, and that major new global markets will now be created for renewable energy, and for low-carbon products and new technologies.

What fewer people have noticed is that it was also a remarkable display of the political power of civil society. The Paris agreement was forged over two gruelling weeks of negotiations between governments. But it was crafted into being over the previous five years by a broad coalition of forces from global civil society.

To understand this, we need to understand the astonishing nature of the agreement reached. The Paris deal requires governments to do something none of them wants to do. Governments hate making commitments that they do not know they can meet, and for which the cost is unknown. But this is precisely what the agreement does. It sets the goal of ensuring that greenhouse gas emissions peak as soon as possible, and then commits to phasing them out altogether in the second half of the century. This is not quite a death sentence for fossil fuels, since it may be possible to capture some emissions in natural systems or underground. But it comes close, requiring their almost complete replacement by renewable energy (and possibly nuclear power), even while global energy demand continues to grow. At the same time it requires a complete end to deforestation within the next decade or so, even while agricultural production must rise to feed a growing human population. And it means a fundamental redesign of the world's cities to reduce energy and transport emissions, even while the world continues to urbanise.

All of this is necessary if the rise in global temperature is to be held to 'well below 2°C', or even to 1.5°C as the agreement stipulates. But right now we do not know precisely how achieving 'net zero' greenhouse gas emissions

will be technologically possible, and we certainly have no idea of the cost. 80 per cent of the world's energy still comes from fossil fuels despite the advances in renewables in the last decade.

It is therefore extraordinary that governments have set themselves this radical goal. But they have done more than this. The agreement requires governments, every five years, to set progressively more ambitious targets to reduce emissions. These targets must be based on a scientific 'stock-take', also conducted every five years, that will show how far current plans fall short of the 2°C and 1.5°C targets. The Paris agreement therefore guarantees that governments will come under huge pressure to strengthen their targets on a regular basis. To what degree individual governments respond to such pressure remains their prerogative, but it will almost certainly drive them into policies they are reluctant to adopt, such as taxing carbon, reducing subsidies for fossil fuels and phasing out the use of coal. This will antagonise powerful vested interests, and risks stoking political opposition.

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## THE QUADRUPLE ALLIANCE

The answer is that they have effectively been forced to. Following the failed Copenhagen conference in 2009, an informal global coalition of NGOs, businesses, academics and others came together to define an acceptable outcome to the Paris conference and then applied huge pressure on governments to agree to it. Some of this activity was formally co-ordinated; much of it came from individual organisations and coalitions. But the combined effect was to generate a political momentum that proved strong enough, in the end, to overcome all resistance. Civil society effectively identified the landing ground for the agreement, then encircled and squeezed the world's governments until, by the end of the Paris conference, they were standing on it. Four key forces made up this effective alliance.

### The scientific community

The first was the scientific community. Five years ago the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which reviews and summarises evidence from the world's climate scientists, was in trouble. Relentless attacks from climate sceptics and a number of apparent scandals – the 'climategate' emails, dodgy data on melting Himalayan glaciers, allegations surrounding its chairman – had undermined its credibility. But the scientists fought back, subjecting their work to even more rigorous peer-review and hiring professional communications expertise for the first time. The result was the IPCC's landmark Fifth Assessment Report, published over several months in 2013–2014. The report was not just another painstakingly sober – and sobering – account of the latest evidence on the impacts of climate change and the costs and benefits of acting on it. It also contained two powerful central insights.

First, the IPCC report introduced the concept of a ‘carbon budget’: the total amount of carbon dioxide the earth’s atmosphere can absorb before the 2°C temperature goal is breached. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, that amounts to around 800 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. Of this, approximately 530 billion tonnes has already been used up, which leaves another 270 billion tonnes available to the world and its future economic growth. At present emission rates, even without growth, that would be used up in less than 30 years. So cutting emissions cannot wait.

The other insight was that these emissions have to be reduced until they reach zero. The IPCC’s models are clear: the physics of global warming means that to halt the world’s temperature rise, the world will have to stop producing greenhouse gas emissions altogether. If we want to hold it to under 2°C, net zero carbon emissions will have to be reached by 2060–2075, and all greenhouse gases emissions halted before the end of the century.

### The economic community

The IPCC’s report put the scientific evidence on climate change right back on the political agenda. But it was a second set of forces that really changed the argument. Back in 2006, the UK government’s Stern report had convincingly shown that the costs of future climate change were far greater than the current costs of preventing it. But since the financial crash in 2008–2009, cutting emissions had fallen down the priority lists of the world’s finance ministries. The old orthodoxy that environmental policy was an unaffordable cost to the economy reasserted itself. A new argument was required.

Enter the Global Commission on the Economy and Climate, an initiative hatched by a number of economists, research institutes and the Swedish, Norwegian and UK governments to re-examine the evidence on climate change and economic growth. Chaired by the former Mexican president Felipe Calderón, and comprising more than 20 leading figures from politics, business and finance, the Commission’s report, *Better Growth, Better Climate*,<sup>1</sup> set out a powerful new argument. Cutting emissions was not just compatible with economic growth: it could generate *better* growth, with lower air pollution, more liveable and economically efficient cities, more sustainable use of land and greater energy security. Published in September 2014, the report drew on longstanding academic work on ‘green growth’ and the practical evidence of international organisations such as the UN Environment Programme and the UN Development Programme. Its message quickly reverberated around the world: by the time Calderón’s presentation received a standing ovation at the Lima climate conference in December 2014, it had become the dominant discourse of climate action, repeated by governments and businesses alike. The heads of the mainstream economic organisations quickly took it up: some of the strongest advocates of low-carbon growth soon included Christine Lagarde of the International Monetary Fund, Jim Kim of the World Bank and Ángel Gurría of the OECD.

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1 <http://2014.newclimateeconomy.report/>

At the same time, a quite separate economic story was being told by a tiny NGO in London called Carbon Tracker. Founded by former investment managers Mark Campanale and Nick Robins, Carbon Tracker took up the IPCC's idea of the global carbon budget and turned it into a startling proposition. If the world was to stay within the 2°C limit, 80 per cent of the world's remaining oil, gas and coal reserves were now effectively 'unburnable' and would have to be left in the ground. If governments acted on their own commitments, it would leave many of the world's fossil fuel companies with 'stranded assets', unable to continue planned production and with heavily devalued share prices. The world's stock markets and pension funds were effectively sitting on a 'carbon bubble'.

Carbon Tracker's analysis spread like wildfire. Some of the biggest shareholding institutions sat up. The insurance sector had already begun to understand the risk that heightened climate impacts could have both on its products (as insurance claims from extreme weather events rocketed) and on its investments. Within just four years of Carbon Tracker's first report, Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England, was warning of the financial risks of climate change, and the global Financial Stability Board was starting to draw up guidelines on how companies and asset holders should 'stress test' their investments against different climate scenarios and publicly disclose their risks.

### The businesses

As these narratives of science and economics gathered pace, a critical new player began to amplify them. The traditional stance of business organisations had been to oppose stronger climate policy. However, over the last decade a number of leading global corporations, exemplified by the consumer goods giant Unilever, had begun to argue in public that strong climate policy was in the interests of business. On the one hand the ways in which climate change threatens water and food production in supply chains around the world had become increasingly clear. On the other, the growth of green and renewable energy policy has created a global market in low-carbon and environmental goods and services now worth US\$5.5 trillion and growing at 3 per cent a year. This has generated whole new industries – such as wind and solar power – dependent on strong climate policy.

For Unilever and other global giants such as Nike, IKEA and Bank of America, it was not enough for businesses to take advantage of the new markets: they should be advocating for policy change. The result was the creation of a new global network, We Mean Business, that brought together seven global business and investor organisations to lobby in favour of climate policy and for a new international agreement. By September 2014 over 1,000 global companies were calling on governments to introduce 'carbon pricing' through carbon taxes or emissions trading schemes. By May 2015 organisations representing over 6.5 million businesses were urging an ambitious climate agreement in Paris.

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## The NGOs

Meanwhile, environmental NGOs had shifted their campaign tactics in the aftermath of the Copenhagen conference. While some NGOs downgraded climate campaigning altogether, others focussed their attention on a different battle: the fight against fossil fuels.

The initial focus was coal. Beginning in the US and western Europe, broad-based coalitions with the aim of stopping the building of new coal-fired power stations rapidly spread across the world, as protests over air pollution, land rights and corruption – and the attractions of renewable energy – aligned with climate concerns. Local groups joined forces with sophisticated national campaigns, at great personal risk to protestors in some countries. But the results have been remarkable: since 2010 new coal generation has been virtually abandoned in the US and western Europe, and almost 900 projected plants have been cancelled worldwide. Global coal demand has now tipped into decline, with the movement in the US and Europe now pressing to phase out its use altogether.

Greenpeace turned its attention to protecting the Arctic, and in particular to Shell's plans to drill for oil there. Combining its usual methods of spectacular direct action with the mass campaigning of over 7 million supporters around the world, the campaign achieved a landmark victory just a few months before Paris, when Shell announced its withdrawal from the Arctic.

What made the NGO revival after Copenhagen different was its global nature. As it became clearer in many developing countries that climate change was already occurring, it increasingly became a focus for a huge range of civil society organisations struggling for development, women's rights, the rights of indigenous people and other social and economic issues. The global labour movement, too, took it up. The International Trade Union Confederation shifted its campaign strategy away from simply defending jobs under threat and towards arguments for industrial and community support policies to enable a 'just transition' from a high-carbon to low-carbon economy. In many countries city mayors and state governors also became critical advocates and exponents of change.

At the same time, two much newer NGOs entered the fray. 350.org, founded by the American writer and activist Bill McKibben, fired up a largely student and youth membership with two highly imaginative and focused campaigns. Picking up Carbon Tracker's concept of 'unburnable carbon', and drawing inspiration from the anti-apartheid disinvestment campaigns of the 1980s, 350.org called upon universities and other institutions to divest from fossil fuel companies. The campaign expanded to include supporters among pension funds and other financial institutions. These argued not that fossil fuel companies were immoral, simply that in a climate-constrained world they were not sound financial assets. At the same time 350.org mounted a nationwide campaign in the US against the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, designed to bring oil from the carbon-heavy Canadian tar sands through the US to the Gulf of Mexico. Bringing together a huge range of opponents – one colourful protest featured Nebraskan ranchers alongside native Americans in a

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'cowboys and Indians' alliance – the campaign reached a triumphant conclusion in November this year, when President Obama announced that the pipeline was incompatible with the US's climate policies and would not be approved.

Meanwhile the online campaigning organisation Avaaz was steadily building a global supporter base. Deploying an imaginative combination of online petitions and email campaigns with street protests and paid-for advertisements in newspapers around the world, Avaaz acquired new supporters at the rate of a million a month. Entirely self-financed from small donations, it had reached 42 million global supporters by the time of the Paris conference.

## THE 2014 CLIMATE SUMMIT

These four emerging forces in civil society – science, economics, business and NGOs – first came together in an organised way around the climate summit in New York in September 2014. Organised by UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon, the summit was unusual in that it brought together not just heads of government but leaders from business and finance, city mayors and state governors, heads of international organisations and NGOs. While the heads of state made speeches accepting the IPCC's science and the new economics of low-carbon growth, hundreds of new commitments to climate action were made by this new community of 'non-state actors' – from stopping deforestation in commodity supply chains to investing in renewable energy; from disinvesting in fossil fuels to making cities more sustainable; from reducing emissions in agriculture to helping developing countries build resilience to climate disasters.

But it was outside the conference hall that the summit really took off. For months a small number of activists had seen the event as a perfect opportunity to mobilise large numbers of climate supporters around the world in big street marches. But the major NGOs were not convinced: what decisions would be made in New York?

So a remarkable thing happened. The idea for a climate march was taken up by the newcomers 350.org and Avaaz, working with community organisations in New York. In the end the big NGOs came on board, and the People's Climate March on 23 September 2014 became the largest in the history of climate campaigning, and one of the largest ever – 400,000 people in New York, and many more in countless parallel marches in cities around the world. It put climate change onto the front pages of almost every newspaper, and made sure that the leaders gathering at the summit knew they were being watched. Some even joined it.

The climate summit marked the long build-up of political momentum towards the Paris conference. In June 2015 the Pope's encyclical on climate change, *Laudato Si*, galvanised support from faith-based organisations, particularly in the developing world; he was joined in his calls for climate action by leaders from almost every other faith.

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## THE THINKTANKS

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, a fifth civil society force was exerting its influence: the thinktanks and academics drawing up designs for the agreement to be secured in Paris. Organisations such as the World Resources Institute (WRI) and C2ES in Washington DC, the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, the National Centre for Climate Change Strategy and International Cooperation in Beijing and the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) in Paris conducted quiet consultations with governments and civil society organisations to gather ideas and build support for a new international regime. A gradual consensus coalesced around the concepts of a five-yearly stock-take and cycle of commitments, parity between mitigation and adaptation, the importance of ‘climate justice’, finance for developing countries, and the definition of an accounting and monitoring regime.

The most remarkable of these efforts was the idea that the agreement should have at its heart the long-term goal of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions to zero in the second half of the century. This was the idea of London-based lawyer and longstanding negotiator Farhana Yamin. She argued that, since ‘net zero emissions’ was what the IPCC said was required to hold global warming to under 2°C, it should be the goal of the agreement. When Yamin set out the proposition in early 2013, few people in the climate movement thought it was remotely achievable – it might be true, but it was surely far too radical for governments to adopt. But Yamin was undeterred. She set up a small NGO, Track 0, to campaign for it, and used her extensive global networks to win support. It rapidly became clear that Yamin had hit on the concept that could unify the entire civil society movement, now growing in strength. The scientists supported it; the economists and business organisations recognised that it would send the clearest signal to investors about the future direction of the global economy; and the NGOs saw it as the end of fossil fuels. When German chancellor Angela Merkel indicated that she too would support it, a brilliantly orchestrated campaign, supported by a 3-million-strong Avaaz petition, produced a remarkable outcome: agreement at the G7 meeting of industrialised country leaders in Bavaria in June 2015 that they should phase out greenhouse gas emissions altogether by the end of the century.

Gathering all these forces together, the climate movement made a bold decision. The Paris conference had to become another make-or-break moment, at which maximum pressure must be applied to governments. Many warned against raising expectations: hadn’t we done this before Copenhagen, and then been catastrophically defeated? The world could not afford another failure. But others realised that that risk had to be taken – if ambition wasn’t high enough, a sufficiently strong agreement would be impossible. The Paris conference would not solve the problem, but it had to be a big deal.

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## THE DIPLOMACY

In the run-up to the conference, the dominant dynamic in the UN negotiations was the relationship between the US and China. Determined to leave a new international agreement as part of his legacy, President Obama and his secretary of state John Kerry prioritised the establishment of a climate relationship with the Chinese government. A joint statement between the two heads of state in November 2014 was followed by a second in September 2015. This raised many people's hopes that a new agreement could indeed be signed: if the two largest polluters and global powers were aligned, the chances were surely good. But it also led many to fear that the agreement would be weak, for neither the US nor China would want to be constrained by the goals and rules of a binding international treaty.

But in Paris something else happened. The US and China continued to talk, but a much more powerful force emerged as the dominant voice in the negotiations. This was that of the countries most vulnerable to climate change – the low-lying islands and others who are already experiencing severe impacts from rising temperatures and extreme weather events. The structure of the UN climate negotiations, which requires decisions by consensus, gives small countries unusual power if they act together. A new grouping of 43 countries, the Climate Vulnerable Forum, made itself heard alongside the more traditional groupings of small island states, least developed countries and African countries. Together they set the negotiating agenda: they would not sign an agreement unless it had the target of holding global warming to 1.5°C rather than 2°C; included the long-term goal of net zero emissions; recognised that developing countries needed support for the loss and damage they were already experiencing from climate change; and committed developed countries to scaling up finance from a floor of \$100 billion per year in 2020.

Supported on the outside by a broad coalition of NGOs coordinated by the international Climate Action Network, and a looser group of organisations led by WRI's climate director Jennifer Morgan, the vulnerable countries reached agreement first with the Latin Americans and European Union and then, remarkably, with the US. A common agenda was agreed, including a commitment to the five-year cycles and to a single 'transparency' system of measurement, reporting and verification which would apply to all countries. This new 'high ambition alliance' challenged other countries to join them. To see one of the tiniest nations on earth, the Marshall Islands, alongside other small countries such as St Lucia and the Gambia, co-ordinating the agreement of the EU and US – and eventually Canada, Brazil and others – to a radical common platform was a remarkable sight. As one Filipino negotiator said, 'it was the ants moving the elephants'.

The final piece of the jigsaw that created the Paris agreement was the expert management of the conference by the French government, led by foreign minister Laurent Fabius and his climate ambassador Laurence Tubiana. Together with the executive secretary of the UNFCCC, Christiana Figueres, they handled the two-week negotiations superbly, ensuring that all countries felt listened to and that the agreement gave everyone something of what they wanted. The key decision occurred on

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the Thursday of the second week, when the French issued a bold draft of the final agreement. It was high risk: it could have been rejected. But it was brilliant politics. By anchoring the text in the principles of equity, ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ and sustainable development, and ensuring continued differentiation between developed and developing countries (though not a on a fixed and binary model, which the US and EU could not accept) they achieved the seemingly impossible – an agreement that met the demands of the ‘high ambition alliance’, but also gave China, India, Saudi Arabia and others what they sought. In the end, it ensured that everyone acceded to a high ambition agreement.

## THE NEW POLITICS OF CLIMATE

So Paris was a triumph for multilateral diplomacy. But it would not have happened without the huge mobilisation of civil society in the five years beforehand. By orchestrating the narratives of science and economics to demand strong climate action, and organising the business community, NGOs and many others in support of a strong agreement, it was civil society that pressured governments into the positions that made the final negotiations possible.

That’s why the vast majority of environmental NGOs have welcomed the agreement. And it’s why the reaction of the few that did not – those such as Friends of the Earth, who called the Paris outcome a ‘sham’ – is so short-sighted. Of course in an ideal world governments would have committed to higher ambitions now. But in the world we live in, this was more or less as good as it could have been, and far stronger than most people realistically thought possible. Moreover, it owed a great deal to civil society pressure. If you cannot recognise victory when it comes, how can your supporters ever feel that campaigning is worth it? Rejection of the agreement sends a terrible message to campaigners and activists. It says to them – whatever you do, whatever you achieve, you’ve always failed.

More importantly, the agreement casts new light on the relationship between civil society, governments and capitalism. In her bestselling book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, 2014), Naomi Klein argues that climate change is the inevitable consequence of capitalism, and that the former will only be combatted if the latter is overthrown. This thesis, intended as a clarion call for campaigners, was always a recipe for despair. If it depends on capitalism being overthrown, reversing climate change in the little time we have available will surely be impossible. But the real problem is that the causality in this argument is the wrong way round. We do not have to overthrow capitalism to tackle global warming. On the contrary, by tackling climate change, we can change capitalism.

This is what the Paris agreement will set in train. In order to achieve the targets they have set, governments will have to introduce policies that regulate businesses and shape markets. They will have to tax carbon and incentivise innovation. They will need industrial policies and public expenditure. They will find themselves penalising fossil fuel industries and encouraging energy efficiency. They will have to create cities that work for people, and land-use systems that sustain the forests, soil and water.

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And in doing these things they will ensure that capitalism can no longer destroy the climate system, because global society will no longer allow that to happen.

This is, of course, why those on the free-market right so hate the climate agenda. They know that dealing with it involves managing and shaping capitalism in order to achieve social and environmental goals. But equally, it is why everyone else, from social democrats to greens, liberals and Christian democrats, can welcome the Paris agreement as a signifier that our economic system is not out of our control.

So has the agreement saved the world? Of course not. No international negotiation can do that. As many people have pointed out, the agreement is just a framework of goals and rules. Now governments have to act on it – and at every step there will be battles with powerful forces that continue to pursue a high-carbon economy. Achieving a temperature rise limit of 2°C, let alone 1.5°C, will be an immensely difficult process requiring transformative economic change that will challenge our political system. It will take immense, continuing efforts by civil society to force governments down the path to zero emissions that they have now laid out.

But in building this agreement, civil society has cleverly written itself into it. Lying at the heart of the agreement are the five-yearly ‘global moments’, when governments will have to face up to the inadequacy of their current efforts and commit to doing more. At each of these moments it will be up to the combined forces of civil society – in every country – to pressure them into doing so. As ever throughout history, economic and social change will come from below, from a coalition of social movements and enlightened businesses, campaigners and visionaries. It was how the Paris agreement was constructed over the last five years. And it is how the agreement just may be able to save the planet over the next 50.

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