The twenty-first session of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP21) was convened in Le Bourget Paris in the frame of the Paris Climate Change Conference, hosting the largest number of participants ever seen, including 20,000 government/parties representatives, 8,000 IGOs/NGOs observers, and 3,000 media.

During the first days of the negotiations, for the first time in history, 150 heads of state meet together under the same roof to give the clear and unequivocal signal that climate change is a real and unprecedented challenge for humanity, which requires an unprecedented and urgent global action, based on the collaboration and contribution of all countries.

On the 12 December 2016, after two weeks of intense negotiations, one day after the expected end-date, the Decision FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1, including the annex with the Paris Agreement, has been approved by the 196 Parties by consensus.

The approved document includes the Decision of 20 pages, and the Paris Agreement of 12 pages, this in order to facilitate approval of the agreement by governments without requiring the ratification by national parliaments, which would have been practical impossible in some countries i.e. United States of America.
The Paris Agreement is a universal and legally binding agreement, providing a solid architecture and ambitious targets, coordinating and mainstreaming action to face climate change challenge globally. The Decision, which is non-legally binding, contains fundamental provisions and a clear work plan/timeline to put flesh on bones of the Paris Agreement itself, particularly enhancing action prior to 2020.

Reception of the Paris Agreement

The reception of the Paris Agreement by the Parties was overall very positive, with the only exception of Nicaragua; most Parties highlighted particularly its historical importance and ambition, although in a realistic and pragmatic manner, explicitly mentioning that there is space and need for improvement, particularly regarding the ambition gaps between the targets set by the Agreement and the current national pledges. All Parties had converging views on the fact that this historical turning point required celebrating but, immediately after, hard work is required because this is not an end but a new beginning.

Most Parties requested to make a statement after the approval of the Decision and the Paris Agreement, including:

South Africa (G77 and China group), “. . the text is not perfect, but a solid foundation for action, with renew determination, balance…the approval of this document is a historic moment….technical works is still needed”

Australia, “Our work here is done, and we have now to implement, this historical agreement, a legal global agreement….The world has come together with common aspirations….No country will see this as perfect, however we have a strategy to work together…Each of us will progress together, no country will step back”

Switzerland (Integrity group), “this is a historic moment…We bridged a dangerous divide…This changes the world to the better…This is not the end of our endeavour, this is the start”

European Union, “This is the success of world countries and the success of all civil society….It is a manifesto of a better world, for a just and sustainable world…It is a huge challenge but we are committee… It is an effective response for the challenges faced by humanity…A tremendous collective achievement….Today we celebrate tomorrow we work for a tangible progress.”

China, “The agreement is not perfect, it can be improved in some area, but this is historic to make this step forward…This is a key point, it is critical for global future… It is fair, just, comprehensive, balance and ambitious…It is a positive and strong signal, to achieve low carbon sustainable development in the world.”

United States of America, “This is a tremendous victory for our citizens, for all the planet, for future generations….The world has reached a historic agreement….Everybody here understand it, although not everybody likes everything…. It would not be a good agreement if we were not thinking that this is not perfect…This is a legacy for the generations to come.”
India. Today is historic, we wrote a new chapter of hope for the people on the planet… We have today made something or the future generation to give them a better world… This agreement can be more ambitious for the 2 degrees and for historical responsibilities, but the agreement is here.”

Venezuela. (Alba group) “Historic moment…We can leave Paris with life and hope…the preamble is revolutionary for the social dimension of climate change…In Copenhagen we said no, because conserving multilateralism was fundamental, today we have a better agreement…We support this agreement.”

Egypt: (Africa group) “This is historical, for our countries and common pathway to sustainable development…We believe that the language shall be improved …A new era for governance”

Key points of the Paris Agreement

A key frame aspect of the Paris Agreement is the linkage between the response to the threat of climate change and the context of eradication of poverty and sustainable development. Another important point is related to the implementation of the agreement that will be based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, capabilities and national circumstances.

Here bellow some of the key points of the Paris Agreement:

Mitigation

The mitigations targets are very ambitious, aiming at “Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels” [Article 2 of the Agreement].

Countries should aim to balance their emissions by the second half of this century, and aim to achieve the global peaking as soon as possible. These are very ambitious targets because the carbon budget to maintain the temperature below 2 degrees is circa 1000 billion tones CO2, circa half for 1.5 degrees, and the current annual global emissions area proximately 50 billion tones of CO2.

Although it is noted with concern that the current mitigations pledges by the parties (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions INDCS) for global annual reductions of greenhouse gases emissions by 2020 are insufficient to holding the global average temperature below 2.0 raise compared to pre-industrial time [Article 17 of the Decision].

From 2020 countries are requested to submit national climate action plans, including national determined contributions, more ambitious than the present ones; using a universally harmonize system for accounting, verification and evaluation. [Article 4 of the Agreement].
Starting from 2023 a Global Stocktake will be realized jointly every five years to evaluate the progress toward the implementation of actions and the achievement of the goals set by the Agreement. At the same time every five year the Parties will submit/review Nationally Determined Contributions which shall be more ambitious than the current ones. [Article 2, 4 and 14 of the Agreement].

Adaptation

“Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production” [Article 2 of the Agreement]

The previous climate agreements and negotiations were taking into account principally mitigation, starting with the Paris Agreement the importance and urgency of adaptation actions is better acknowledged. Moreover there are specific provisions regarding loss and damages, determined by rapid and slow on setting catastrophic events. [Article 7 and 8 of the Agreement]

National adaptation plans will be prepared, implemented and communicated periodically by the Parties, in line with the general adaptation goals, which unfortunately are quite vague at the moment. [Article 7 of the Agreement]

It is also important to outline the explicit mention to resilience, and possible also through this concept, the importance of integrating adaptation and mitigation actions, also in-sight of co-benefits.

Finance, Technology and Capacity Building

“Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development.”[Article 2 of the Agreement]

Moreover the Paris Agreement recognizes the need for an urgent and improved provision of finance, capacity building and technology to be arranged by developed countries in support of developing countries to enhance their capacity of action in the already in the short term before 2020.

Regarding the finance, it is explicitly requested that both private and public financial flows are redirected from high to low carbon emissions activities, as well as toward dedicated investment for risk reduction and adaptation, specific financial provision should also be made available for technology transfer and capacity building. [Article 9 of the Agreement]

Importance of the agreement

The adoption of the Paris Agreement highlights the urgency of addressing climate change, through a deep reduction of global emissions and adaptation actions; reminding that it is a common concern of entire human kind, and in the interest of present and future generations.
“Recognizing that climate change represents an urgent and potentially irreversible threat to human societies and the planet and thus requires the widest possible cooperation by all countries, and their participation in an effective and appropriate international response, with a view to accelerating the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions.” (United Nations, 2015):1

The adoption of the Paris Agreement has been an historical moment for humankind, particularly for the future generations that will suffer more the effects and impacts of climate change, which was set in motion and is driven by human activities. Moreover the Paris Agreement has a strong inspirational value in terms of international cooperation, beyond climate change, showing that the world is able to coming together to address collaboratively global challenges.

Ban Ki-Moon: “This is a monumental success for the entire world… This agreement is for the wellbeing of generations to come… We can look the eyes our children, we can tell them that we have joined hand for secure their future… The work starts tomorrow.”

Francoise Holland: “You did it! Later you would be able to say: 12 December 2015, I was in Paris, and you would be able to be proud with you children and grandchildren.”

References

UNITED NATIONS 2015. Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (decision 1/CP.17). Adoption of a protocol, another legal instrument, or an agreed outcome with legal force under the Convention applicable to all Parties. ADOPTION OF THE PARIS AGREEMENT. Paris: UNFCCC.