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## Paris Climate Change Accord Is Just the Beginning

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# Paris climate change accord is just the beginning

*Agreement signals hope for the planet, but the struggle is far from over*

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by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

On Dec. 12 nearly 200 world leaders reached a landmark [agreement](#) in Paris on confronting the climate crisis, sending a critical message about the collective international obligation to turn away from fossil fuels. For the first time, poor and rich countries alike committed to curbing the greenhouse gas emissions that serve as the drivers for global warming by phasing out their reliance on carbon fuels in favor of renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.

The Paris accord marks a turning point for the planet. World leaders now acknowledge that climate change has and will continue to exact an incalculable toll on the world's people, especially the most vulnerable. It gives testament to the power of a mobilized global movement demanding universal and decisive action to avert a devastating climate breakdown.

The accord requires countries to develop and submit detailed plans to curb CO2 emissions. States are required to submit to the [ratchet mechanism](#), a framework that mandates them to return to the table every five years to review their emission reduction targets and spell out plans for progressively deeper cuts.

But the agreement's significant shortcomings underscore why this is only the beginning of a long and arduous battle. For example, a framework for transparency and compliance, through reporting and monitoring, has not yet been developed. And civil society will bear much of the burden of ensuring compliance with present commitments and in pressuring governments to act far more aggressively and equitably to avert the impending climate disaster.

Furthermore, the \$100 billion a year in public and private financing pledged by wealthy countries to assist poorer countries to develop clean energy and ameliorate the hardships of rising sea levels and extreme weather is woefully inadequate. Besides, while the accord recognizes the differing responsibilities and obligations to address the crisis, individual financial commitments are not enforceable. Activists are concerned that existing aid could be repackaged as climate aid, eviscerating the assistance these funds are intended to provide.

That's not all. Countries set a goal of keeping the average global temperature increase below 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, with a widely hailed aspiration to limit the rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. A "1.5 to stay alive" campaign to lower the target was thought quixotic even in the face of mounting evidence that it is a tipping point for the climate, beyond which it could spin out of control. States agreed to balance carbon outputs and inputs in order to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by the second half of the century. Yet experts say that the current commitments will result in an increase of nearly 3 degrees.

"The Paris agreement is a death sentence for many people," Pablo Solón, a former climate negotiator for Bolivia, [told Democracy Now](#) on Dec. 14. "A world with temperature increases more than 3 degrees Celsius is a world where not everyone will survive."

## **The Paris climate agreement alone cannot not save the planet.**

### **Activists should savor the progress but not pause to rest.**

Since certain key provisions of the accord are not binding, political mobilization and naming and shaming will remain essential to prod nations to honor their commitments. Washington was instrumental in ensuring that the provisions are unenforceable, in part to avoid a bruising congressional showdown over ratification. But the lack of enforceability means that President Barack Obama's successor can easily walk back any commitments. The risk is highlighted by the Republican leadership's stubborn denial of climate change and [the threat it poses](#) to U.S. security.

The agreement contains other disappointing setbacks for the climate justice movement. Inclusion of the loss and damage clause acknowledges that rich, industrialized countries have developed at the expense of the planet's health by using more than their share of resources and emitting far more than their share of pollution while many poorer nations remain most [vulnerable to the devastating effects of climate change](#). Yet the clause stipulates that it “does not involve or provide a basis for any liability or compensation.” The carve-out leaves those harmed to rely on the goodwill of wealthier countries instead of creating enforceable rights.

Ultimately, parts of the Paris agreement could imperil the poor instead of ensuring their protection. For example, critics have labeled carbon-trading schemes to offset emissions as [carbon colonization](#) that has spurred land grabs and spawned conflict around the globe. A [March 2014 report](#) by the advocacy coalition Rights and Resources Initiative outlines the inadequacy of current legal protection for indigenous and local communities under carbon trading initiatives. World leaders [declined to exclude large hydroelectric projects](#) from sustainable climate initiatives despite a plea from more than [300 civil society organizations](#). In fact, human rights and protections for indigenous peoples were relegated to a nonbinding section of the agreement, weakening their ability to safeguard those who need it most.

Activists have denounced the [corporate capture](#) of the Paris talks, including sponsorship of the talks by corporations with dirty pollution records and vested interests in and track records of hampering decarbonization of the economy. Corporations had an evident and outsize influence in exacerbating the climate crisis and thwarting reform attempts. Corporate malfeasance on the climate front was exemplified by the revelation that [Exxon's 1977 research](#) found burning fossil fuels was warming the planet and could harm humanity. Instead of working to ameliorate the predicted consequences, by the 1980s, Exxon had retrenched and invested its efforts in promoting climate denial.

“The fossil fuel industry’s lingering chokehold over U.S. politics leaves the Paris agreement a nearly empty vessel,” Carroll Muffett, the president of the Center for International Environmental Law, [said in statement on Dec. 12](#).

The Paris accord emanated from the combination of irrefutable scientific evidence of an imminent climate cataclysm, the persistent efforts of a vibrant and committed global climate movement and the dangers and harms already caused by extreme weather patterns. But the agreement alone cannot and will not save the planet. Activists should savor the progress but not pause to rest. Ensuring the accord amounts to more than hollow proclamations depends not on politicians but on the ability of the climate justice movement to sustain its vigilance and overcome resistance to the adaptations we all have to make, especially by those who profit most from damaging practices. In the end, our fates are all intertwined.

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