

16106 What the Paris Climate Meeting Must Do

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In 1992, more than 150 nations agreed at a meeting in Rio de Janeiro to take steps to stabilize greenhouse gases at a level that would “prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” — United Nations-speak for global warming. Many follow-up meetings have been held since then, with little to show for them. Emissions of greenhouse gases have steadily risen, as have atmospheric temperatures, while the consequences of unchecked warming — persistent droughts, melting glaciers and ice caps, dying corals, a slow but inexorable sea level rise — have become ever more pronounced.

On Monday, in Paris, the signatories to the Rio treaty (now 196), will try once again to fashion an international climate change agreement that might actually slow, then reduce, emissions and prevent the world from tipping over into full-scale catastrophe late in this century. As with other climate meetings, notably Kyoto in 1997 and Copenhagen in 2009, Paris is being advertised as a watershed event.

Paris will almost certainly not produce an ironclad, planet-saving agreement in two weeks. But it can succeed in an important way that earlier meetings have not — by fostering collective responsibility, a strong sense among countries large and small, rich and poor, that all must play a part in finding a global solution to a global problem.

Kyoto failed because it imposed emissions reduction targets only on developed countries, giving developing nations like China, India and Brazil a free pass. That doomed it in the United States Senate. Copenhagen attracted wider participation, but it broke up in disarray, in part because of continuing frictions between the industrialized nations and the developing countries.

The organizers of the Paris conference have learned a lot from past mistakes. Instead of pursuing a top-down agreement with mandated targets, they have asked every country to submit a national plan that lays out how and by how much they plan to reduce emissions in the years ahead. (...)

Will these pledges be enough to ward off the worst consequences of global warming? No. Scientists generally agree that global warming must not exceed 2 degrees Celsius, or 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, from preindustrial levels. Various studies say that even if countries that have made pledges were to follow through on them, the world will heat up by 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of this century. (...)

Eventually, of course, all nations will have to improve on their pledges, especially big emitters like China, India and the United States. (...)

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