Headline: What to look forward to in COP23

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I have just arrived in Bonn, Germany to attend the 23rd Conference of Parties (COP23) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) being held here for the next two weeks. The annual COP takes place in November or December each year and is hosted by a country in a different continent each time.

This year it is the turn of Asia Pacific and the official host is Fiji. However, since Fiji could not accommodate around 20,000 participants from all over the world, the Government of Germany has kindly offered to physically host the meeting in Bonn while Fiji is the official host. The prime minister of Fiji is the COP president.

Not every COP is equally important in terms of decision-making and COP23 is a relatively low-key COP where the focus will be on developing the details of implementation of the Paris Agreement (PA) which was achieved at COP21 in Paris, France in December 2015 at a very high-level COP with over a hundred heads of state in attendance.

The PA has set the long-term global temperature goal of staying well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to limit temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius if possible, as well as agreeing to develop a global goal on adaptation and to treat ‘loss and damage’ as a separate issue from ‘adaptation’.

COP23 will discuss how to implement the agreement by developing the PA rule book, and arranging a facilitated dialogue in 2018 and a global stock-taking in 2023. Here are some of the issues to look out for at COP23.

The question on everyone’s mind is, what will the US do? While the US government has formally given notice of its intention to withdraw from the PA they are still in the UNFCCC and their withdrawal from the PA will take two years to come into force. Hence the US will indeed be sending a delegation which will be able to participate fully, although it remains to be seen how they behave in the negotiations.

The second major issue that has already been highlighted by the prime minister of Fiji is the issue of ‘loss and damage’ from climatic events around the world which can be attributed to human-induced climate change. The series of devastating natural disasters in 2017, including the severe floods in Bangladesh and South Asia, represents a tipping point in terms of the impact of human-induced climate change.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the Category 4 and Category 5 hurricanes that hit Texas (Hurricane Harvey), Florida (Hurricane Irma) and Puerto Rico (Hurricane Maria) this year. The fact that there were hurricanes was quite normal but what was abnormal was the elevated sea surface temperature in the Atlantic and Caribbean which caused each hurricane to be much more intense and devastating than it otherwise would have been. The total loss and damage in Texas, Florida and Puerto Rico is estimated to be over USD 300 billion which the US Congress will now have to consider for their reconstruction. The US, like many other countries, has a system of compensating states for loss and damage but there is no such agreement at the global level.

In COP19 held in Poland in 2013, we did agree to set up the Warsaw International Mechanism (WIM) for Loss and Damage and under it an executive committee was formed which developed a five-year work plan that will be discussed in Bonn. However, the work plan does not address the issue of raising funds for compensation for loss and damage.

So, in Bonn, under the leadership of Fiji and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) and support from the least developed countries (LDCs) group and the Africa group, the issue of innovative financing for compensation for loss and damage will be a contentious issue (as it is likely to be opposed by the developed countries).

Finally, it is important to realise that even though the main task of the COP is for government delegations to negotiate and make important decisions, there are various non-governmental observers from civil society and business community, including the youth, indigenous people, etc., who hold hundreds of side events all over the city. And often these events are far more interesting than the boring “official” negotiations! Over the next two weeks, I hope to issue commentaries on the COP23 negotiations, as well as on the side events in Bonn.

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