

Headline: The grassroots of climate change

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PARIS—The climate-change agreement reached here on Dec. 12 was a rich victory for diplomacy. Both the agreement itself and the atmosphere of cooperation that permeated the proceedings represent a sea change from the failed Copenhagen summit in 2009. But while we should congratulate world leaders on their success, Paris marks the beginning, not the end, of the road. It is now our collective duty to hold our leaders to account and ensure that they turn promises into action—especially in the world's most vulnerable regions, such as Africa.

We should applaud China, India, the United States, and the European Union for their pre-Paris pledges on climate action. These countries' commitments created the sense of responsibility, trust and solidarity that enabled 195 nations not merely to agree on a one-off deal, but to set in motion a series of increasingly ambitious five-year cycles to phase out greenhouse-gas emissions this century. This is a clear signal that the carbon era has reached a turning point; as a result, there will be more investment in renewable energy.

Countries also promised to work harder to protect the world's most vulnerable, by aiming to limit average global warming to as little as 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. And developed countries pledged at least \$100 billion of annual climate finance to help the least developed countries cut their carbon emissions and prepare for climate change. For the first time, an international agreement offers the least developed countries funds to cover some of the loss and damage caused by climate shocks.

But in order to fulfill the Paris agreement, we must ensure that governments keep their promises. National emissions targets are voluntary, rather than inscribed in the agreement, so they are not legally binding. In hard, practical terms, there is not yet anything specific to slow the extraction of fossil fuels or stop high-polluting countries from using coal for electricity. Developed countries made no individual commitments, and the starting year for funding adaptation assistance remains unclear. We must keep the pressure on to make sure that the promised climate finance is sufficient to enable the least-developed countries to adapt to present and future climate change.

All of this must happen urgently. The cumulative effect of previous decades of emissions means that there will be no chance for a last-minute solution.

In Africa, climate change may already be responsible for falling water levels in West African rivers; declining coral reefs in tropical waters; lower fruit production in the Sahel; fewer fish in the Great Lakes region; and the spread of malaria in the Kenyan uplands. Without significant cuts in greenhouse-gas emissions, we will see far worse. By threatening basic human needs, such as food and water, climate change will be a catalyst for instability, migration, and conflict. Africa will pay a heavy price.

Fortunately, we now know that we can prevent catastrophic climate change while still providing the energy needed to sustain economic growth, create jobs, and lift millions of people out of poverty. The many benefits of pursuing a low-carbon development path include not only cleaner air and better energy security, but also the opportunities that arise from decentralized and renewable power.

These opportunities are particularly crucial for Africa, where more than 620 million people live without electricity. The falling cost of solar power, batteries, and LED lighting means that renewable sources can now provide affordable, modern energy. In Kenya, for example, Maasai women in Magadi who have been trained to install solar power have brought electricity to 2,000 households in just two years.

But to realize this economic and social potential, African leaders must combat corruption. They must make the management of their utilities more transparent, strengthen regulations, and increase public spending on energy infrastructure.

Investment and external financing must follow. This is not a question of aid, but of fairness, given that Africa contributes so little to global emissions but stands to suffer the most from climate change. Investing in low-carbon energy also makes sound business sense: It boosts technology companies and promotes social entrepreneurship globally.

I am pleased that two initiatives launched in Paris will take us farther down the renewable-energy path. Europe and Canada pledged \$10 billion toward an ambitious project called the Africa Renewable Energy Initiative, which aims to install 10 gigawatts of solar, wind, and geothermal capacity by the end of the decade. And France and India launched the International Solar Alliance to raise more than \$1 trillion by 2030 to deploy solar power in more than 100 developing countries.

The Paris agreement has drawn the first broad strokes of a solution to climate change. But until its targets are translated into action, the world's least-developed countries may not be convinced that the developed countries are serious about equity—or “climate justice.”

For Africa, 2015 must be a turning point. If the world's citizens hold their leaders to account for the targets they have set, it will be. Quite simply, the historic responsibility for the planet's future rests on the shoulders of us all. Project Syndicate

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