

Building on Success in Paris

Leaders from around the world have just reached a historic agreement to rein in emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. One feature of the Paris deal that has attracted significant attention is that it articulates a more ambitious goal than previously negotiated—to limit warming to well below 2°C, aspiring to no more than 1.5°C.

Given where we are today, staying within that target represents a Herculean effort. But whether we view that goal as unrealistic or appropriately aspirational, the Paris agreement represents a welcome dose of realism to a process that has long been plagued by significantly more grandstanding than concrete action.

The climate deal includes for the first time emissions mitigation pledges from virtually every country on the planet, reflecting the emergence of a pledge-and-review approach. This new, bottom-up process guarantees that the entire world will take voluntary actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—a marked improvement over the Kyoto process.

There is always an urge to make immediate judgments about whether agreements such as this one represent success or failure. In truth, whether this regime proves effective will be determined over the next few years. A cause for optimism is that the key components for success are there. In addition to near-universal participation, countries have agreed to undertake increasingly ambitious actions every five years to reduce emissions, and to report in a transparent manner on those actions.

Critical to the effort is the next phase, the design and implementation of the

review of these pledges—in other words, transparency.

Transparency of commitments in negotiations has been the subject of scholarly research going back to Thomas Schelling 60 years ago and is an area where RFF experts have contributed in recent years. For example, RFF's Joseph Aldy and Billy Pizer have established principles to guide the design of review mechanisms. And at the Paris convention, RFF Senior Fellow Ray Kopp, co-director of RFF's Center for Energy and Climate Economics, in joint work with think tanks in Asia and Europe, presented analyses comparing the first round of commitments made in the lead-up to the negotiations.

The Paris agreement establishes a new path forward in global climate policy. But many of the details, such as when national reviews would begin and how periodic they will be, have yet to be hammered out. Scholarship by RFF researchers and others will inform this effort.

At the end of the day, transparency should help reassure countries that they are not acting alone and push laggards to fulfill their commitments. This global cooperative approach is important, but its success will depend heavily on key countries providing strong leadership, just as the Obama-Xi agreement last year advanced success in Paris by signaling to other nations that real action was possible. ●



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