

# **Is the UN Climate Summit 2015 a decisive or only a small event in the fight for a livable planet?**

80 heads of state and 40,000 officials will meet in Paris from 30 November to 11 December 2015 for the UN Climate Summit, called Conference of Parties 21 or COP 21. It is the 21<sup>st</sup> such meeting since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In 1997, the summit agreed to the Kyoto Protocol, a binding commitment for major polluting nations to limit emissions of greenhouse gasses. President Clinton wanted to sign, but the US Congress never ratified the agreement thus undermining the effort to fight climate change as USA is responsible for 25% of global emissions. When George W Bush became US president the fossil fuel industries got a friend in the White House who steadily worked against the Kyoto Protocol.

At the Climate Summit in Copenhagen in 2009, Obama had become president and there was hope for a new agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol that was due to end in 2012. As negotiators from Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba and others in cooperation with the EU argued for an agreement, USA negotiated with China, India, Brazil and South Africa to oppose a deal and the conference ended with hollow statements. Fingers were pointed at China as culprit, but behind it all we find fossil fuel industries as main obstacles. While negotiations broke down inside the conference halls, the Danish police conducted the largest mass arrest in Danish history of peaceful protesters in the streets.

The following Climate Summits were equally depressing. Fossil fuel industries were main sponsors of the Warsaw Summit in 2013. They held a parallel conference about the wonderful benefits of coal next to the UN Conference. The head of the Philippine delegation spoke forcefully from the podium as typhoon Haiyan had just hit his hometown. Then he broke down in tears in front of the audience. When environmental activists held up a sign in support of the people of the Philippines outside the meeting room they were removed from the conference accused of unauthorized protest. At the same time business leaders responsible for climate crimes freely roamed the conference halls.

## **Will Paris be different?**

When the first Kyoto Protocol expired in 2012 it was extended to 2020, but a new agreement was to be agreed by 2015. The meeting in Paris is

last chance to meet the deadline and a draft of a new agreement has been negotiated over several meetings in 2015.

Before the Paris Summit, each country must submit their plan for how much it will reduce carbon emissions after 2020, how and when this will happen. There are no common demands. It all depends on voluntary commitments from each government.

The overall headline for the last conferences is that global warming must be kept under 2 degrees Celsius as compared to preindustrial levels. Since the 1800s, global average temperature has risen 0.8 degrees. Thus there is little room for emitting more carbon. A calculation shows that 80% of all known fossil fuel reserves must stay in the ground. Some island nations want warming to be kept under 1.5 degrees. Richer countries, however, don't like the 1.5 degrees so we should expect 2 degrees to be in the final document.

The head of the conference, the Costa Rican diplomat, Christiana Figueres Olsen, says that with the plans submitted temperatures will rise 3 degrees. This, she says, is a step forward. Before the commitments the expected rise was 4 degrees. The fact is, however, that 3 degrees warming is catastrophic. Obviously the commitments made so far are insufficient. If governments alone make the decisions climate catastrophe is inevitable. The only way to stop the madness is massive mobilization of people so as to transform energy production and farming, stop environmental destruction and put maximum pressure on governments, fossil fuel and other industries.

Popular pressure is mounting. Many activists are converging in Paris. While the 40,000 officials and invited guests mill around in conference halls, Paris will see some of the largest climate change protests in history. The views and voices of people, who are victims of climate change, will be spoken out loud. 130 environmental and labor organizations will hold an alternative conference "The Citizen Climate Summit" to discuss what people can and must do to avert the catastrophe. Protesters hope their actions will pressure world leaders to agree to more drastic government steps.

## **Points of contention:**

### Should all countries cut emissions with the same percentage?

The sad fact is that rich polluting nations refuse to take responsibility for their past and current actions. USA, Canada, Australia and Saudi Arabia are top polluters and each emits more than 20 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per person per year. India emits 2 tons, while Mozambique and Malawi emit just 0.1 tons per person.

In past negotiations USA demanded that if USA cuts CO<sub>2</sub> emissions other countries must make similar cuts. Meaning, if USA cuts average emissions by 20%, India should do the same, even though the average American emits 10 times as much CO<sub>2</sub> as an Indian and 200 times as much as a Malawian.

### Who is responsible for “loss and damage” caused by climate change?

Poor nations hit by the consequences of climate change have argued that rich polluting nations must pay for “loss and damage”. In short they must pay poor nations to adapt to climate change not as an act of generosity but because polluting nations are culpable for creating climate change. This sounds reasonable in the ears of victims. If someone with or without intent burns down your house, you would like him to pay for you to build a new house, and if you need to go to court you will expect the judge to agree with you.

Western nations hate this argument, and have fought long and hard to exclude it from the final document in Paris. In the end “loss and damage” will, as a compromise, be mentioned once in the 20-page document in article 5 with this sentence:

*“Parties acknowledge the importance of addressing loss and damage associated with climate change impacts and recognize the need for international cooperation and solidarity”.*

This soft formulation will allow rich countries to continue to claim that it is a noble act of charity if they provide emergency assistance to a country hit by yet another hurricane. They do not admit that they are legally obliged to pay for their climate crimes.

### Who will have to pay?

A contentious issue is the raising of funds for mitigation. Here rich nations show extreme stinginess. As to financing the document is expected to state the following in article 6:

*“The mobilization of climate finance shall be scaled up to USD 100 billion per year from 2020.”*

This amount is small when we consider that the IMF has calculated that in 2015 the governments of the world will support fossil fuel energy with

5,300 billion USD – i.e. 50 times as much. Using the world “mobilization” means that we do not know who are going to pay. If it had been grants this would have been in the text, so we are left thinking that poorer nations will have to find the money by themselves – or go begging in richer countries.

#### How to calculate the effects of deforestation and tree planting?

Whereas it is relatively easy to agree on how to calculate CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from burning fossil fuels there is much less agreement on how to estimate the climate effects of change in land use such as cutting down forests or planting trees, also called carbon sinks because trees remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere. If a virgin forest is protected is it a carbon sink? If the forest is cut down and a palm oil plantation is created does this add CO<sub>2</sub> to the atmosphere – and then how much? What is the climate effects of organic farming where the farmer turn CO<sub>2</sub> into new topsoil versus industrial scale chemical farming that depletes the topsoil?

There is no easy way to calculate these effects on which countries have agreed. They might not be able to agree at all and may simply avoid the issue making it more difficult in future to judge if a country is living up to its promises.

#### What happens to those who fail on their promises?

It is an important issue what happens if a country clearly does not live up to the commitments made. This we can read about in article 11:

*“A mechanism is hereby established to facilitate implementation of and promote compliance with the provisions of this Agreement. The mechanism shall be facilitative, non-punitive, non-adversarial and non-judicial.”*

This means the mechanism will simple “facilitate” that nations live up to their commitments, but there will be no punishment for those who fail to do so.

#### Is this a long-term commitment?

And finally if a country does not like being shamed for renegeing on its promises it can drop out without further punishment. Article 25 states:

*“At any time after three years from the date on which this Agreement has entered into force for a Party, that Party may withdraw from this Agreement by giving written notification to the Depositary.”*

#### Will an agreement be reached?

Some of the draft text may still be changed, but only slightly. We must expect that the Paris Summit will agree on a final document, which will

be hailed as a success by governments present and by the media. Obama and Putin will show up together with 80 other heads of states. Australia and Canada, both large emitters of CO<sub>2</sub> have had prime ministers who were against any kind of concession, but both have recently been replaced with new less hawkish prime ministers, which is very positive. Poor nations such as the Philippines who in the past sent passionate negotiators who dared speak truth to power have replaced these activist negotiators with smoother diplomats so as not to upset anybody, and maybe thereby pave the way for the big compromise everybody expect in Paris.

### **Climate crises**

2015 is set to be the warmest year since measurements began. In November 2015, cyclone Chapala hit Yemen. Such heavy wind has never before hit Yemen. Over 48 hours the area got as much rain as it normally gets in 10 years. The month before, the largest hurricane ever formed off the Mexican west coast. The number of weather extremes is long and it is on this context the meeting in Paris takes place.

It was recently discovered that ExxonMobil executives for many years have known about the real effects of climate change while they paid climate change deniers to lie about this reality. ExxonMobil may now end up in court as climate criminals.

Fossil fuel industries, however, are not the only climate criminals. In Indonesia virgin forests are illegally set on fire. Most people suspect that the culprits are oil palm plantation owners who wish to take over the land cleared by fire. This year more than 2 million hectares have burnt out of control, making life impossible for local communities, killing people and animals and producing a smoky haze that covers a big part of South East Asia making it the world's most dangerous place to breathe. While burning forest is a regular practice, the fire has this year been intensified by El Niño that causes dry hot weather in the region. This is the largest wildfire ever created by man. It has produced more greenhouse gasses than all of Germany emits in one year. People in Indonesia have taken to the streets demanding that the responsible are put to prison. Other nations that buy the palm oil should act to stop the perpetrators from profiting from their crimes. This issue is not on the agenda in Paris, although some may start talking about it.

### **Winds of change on the sunny side of the street**

Wind and flowing water have been used as energy sources for hundreds of years, long before industrial coal and oil production. Already 200 years ago, the burning of coal had caused serious environmental destruction in England. Then it was local problem. Today, however, there is danger for

life on Earth. This causes more and more people to take action and demand change.

The compromise that will be struck at the Paris Summit has been made possible by many people's struggle for a future for humanity on planet Earth.

### The power of the wind

Forty years ago, TG started construction of Tvindkraft. It became the world's largest windpower station. Multinational companies were furious. Government agencies claimed windpower had no chance of success. Hundreds of thousands of people went to see the construction and show their support. The example inspired many to build windmills and Denmark became the world's leading producer of windmills. On a windy day windpower supplies 100% of the electricity needs of the whole country.

It was determined people not government and not multinational companies that made this change.

### Solar energy

The solar cell that produces electricity from sunshine was invented 60 years ago. As the amount of sunshine that hits Earth is incredibly much larger than what humanity will ever need to power a very high standard of living it was an important invention. It was a way to replace fossil fuels.

The fossil fuel industries did not like this and called solar cells too expensive and too impractical. They did not research and develop solar power, instead they joined hands with car producer to make sure the motor industries would not shift to electric cars that could run on electricity from sun and wind, and they paid politicians, the media and even some scientists to support fossil fuel use.

In 1998, Germany got its first coalition government of social democrats and the green party. As there was a strong environmental movement in Germany the new government supported solar and wind power. A large solar panel industry was created and even though Germany has limited sunshine, it became a global leader in solar power.

Later China joined in. China has a terrible pollution problem from its coal-power plants that contribute heavily to global warming. China has now become the world's largest producer of solar panels.

Today prices have fallen to a point where wind and solar electricity in many cases is cheaper than electricity from oil, coal and gas even though the fossil fuel industries receive massive government support. Without

this support sustainable energy is today far cheaper than fossil fuel energy.

### Storing electricity

One thing is missing though. You need to be able to store solar and wind electricity for the night and for days without wind or sun. Big energy and car companies have taken little interest in solving the storage issue as they profited from the use of fossil fuels. But today many new companies are working to develop cheaper and better batteries that can store electricity for a house or a car. Prices of batteries are falling fast.

### Divestment from fossil fuel

It has become a problem for oil companies that people are saying no to fossil fuels. A divestment campaign has inspired many foundations, cities and pension funds to sell their shares in fossil fuel companies. After Pope Francis, launched the Catholic Church as partner in the fight against climate change, even the Catholic Church, which has great wealth, is beginning to sell its shares in fossil fuel companies.

### The fossil fuel conglomerates in trouble

In response to these developments, Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, has increased production so as to lower prices and keep people burning oil. The lower prices have hurt oil companies, and in particular the fracking industries that produce oil and gas using vast amounts of toxic chemicals. These companies are losing money. At the same time many local communities protest so forcefully that the companies have to give up fracking.

The old mega oil companies are in crisis. ExxonMobil and Shell have both lost billions of USD just in now, in the third quarter of 2015.

It has become almost impossible in the USA for electricity companies to open new coal power plants and old ones have to reduce their pollution because local protests force authorities to stop the companies.

In November 2015, president Obama decided not to grant permission for the Keystone-XL project, a massive pipeline that was supposed to carry dirty tar sands oil from Canada to Texas. This was a major victory for environmental organization that had fought hard against the project. In Canada, indigenous communities and many others have stopped similar pipelines for tar sand oil going to the Pacific and the Atlantic coast. Big companies are now scaling down production of tar sand oil.

The CEO of the giant German carmaker, VW, was forced to resign in September 2015, when it became known that his company for years had cheated with measurements of pollution from diesel cars. To improve its tattered image VW and other carmakers are now speeding up production

of electric cars, which pollute much less and which many people want. The major car companies, who used to fight against electric cars, now embrace the technology in order to stay in business.

The old car companies are also pressed by new businesses. Rumors have it that Apple, the producer of phones and computers, is developing an electric car to be integrated with its I-phones, which will be launched in 2020. It could become a best seller leading to a very fast transition into electric cars, just like cell phones were spread worldwide in a few years. A shift to electric cars and trucks will greatly reduce use of oil. A shift to electricity production from wind and sun will greatly reduce use of coal.

#### Cities and local communities taking action

Where many governments have been slow to act against climate change, cities and localities where the community has more direct influence on politicians have started to act to limit greenhouse gasses. In July 2015, Pope Francis gathered mayors from big cities around the world, who discussed how they could make cities sustainable such as planting trees, providing public transportation, making room for bicycles, installing solar panels etc. Because local communities for some time have acted on their own, this has started to push national governments towards more action.

#### Financial capitalists begin to see the writing on the wall

The pressure to move away from fossil fuels is finally having an effect on the financial capitalists, who are the major force behind the capitalist system.

The governor of the Bank of England that issues the British currency warned investors in September 2015. He simply said that the vast reserves of fossil fuels could never be burnt and thus investors will end up owning useless oil or coal reserves and making huge financial losses. Goldman Sachs, the leading investment bank in the USA and the ultimate insider whose chief executives go on to become leaders of government agencies and central banks in North America and Europe, announced in November 2015 that it will invest 150 billion USD in clean energy. They do so not because they love nature, but because they love profit and see how people and countries are shifting away from fossil fuels.

#### **The Paris Summit**

The UN is one of the few international agencies where all countries are represented and have a right to speak. Countries on the frontline of climate change, such as small island nations that will be swallowed up by rising sea levels and countries hit by hurricanes, floods and droughts will

speak up and demand climate justice. The rich polluting countries will try not to hear. Most likely the existing draft agreement will be approved, but as explained above it will be insufficient to deal with the disaster.

Thus the struggle of people must continue.

It was action of people that led to the Danish wind industry, to the German support for solar energy, to stopping coal power plants and the Keystone-LX pipeline, it is cities, communities and people that shift to renewable energy, demand electric cars, and choose to use solar lamps instead of kerosene lamps.

Even if all fossil fuel burning were to end tomorrow, the atmosphere is already so polluted with CO<sub>2</sub> that climate change will continue for many, many years, some say thousands of years.

Thus it is up to people to act to make the big steps that need to be taken in the years to come to adapt to the changes that are coming.

Capitalist industrialization 200 years ago and capitalist globalization over the last 40 years have created and accelerated the climate change disaster. We should take note of what will happen in Paris in December. Big words will probably be spoken, but we should be aware that this is only a very small part of the whole story, the story of mankind's struggle for a livable planet, a planet for all people.

The history will be written by people who stand up to the capitalist madness of making money on the destruction of the Earth and its people. The future belongs to people who together build another kind of world.