



Was the 21st Climate Change Conference really a “Monumental Triumph”?

On Saturday 12th of December an agreement between 195 countries was reached and announced at the United Nations climate change conference in Paris. The conference was attended by various world leaders including Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin and David Cameron. The decision was hailed as a “monumental triumph” by UN officials,¹ considering that this conference was assumed to be one final attempt, at reaching a global agreement to tackle climate change, an issue which has plagued modern history for over 25 years.

Since the IPCC (International Panel on Climate Change) first came together in 1990, stating that “emissions resulting from human activities are substantially increasing the atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases,”² various conferences have been held and attended by both developed and developing countries. But it wasn't until 1997 that a so called meaningful objective was achieved with the announcement of the Kyoto Protocol in Japan. An agreement which managed to get 192 parties in agreement, with some being set “binding” emission targets and others non-binding, although the agreement only came into place in 2008, more than a decade after announcement, but it ended in 2012. However, the United States chose to ignore the terms of agreement and one must wonder as to how it was able to do this if it had agreed to the terms initially.

With the 21st conference being held in Paris similar claims, perhaps even greater claims have been made about this agreement, yet one simple fact seems to evade the discussion, which is the fact that this agreement and the role each nation plays within it is voluntary with no international repercussions. When the US chose to ignore its agreement to the Kyoto Protocol, it suffered no economic sanctions or boycotts, no action from the UN against this decision. One can argue that the political clout the US had over the UN prevented any action being taken against them, which is partly true but the fact that the agreement was not a part of international law makes it impossible to enforce.³ The nature of the agreement is yet again the same in the Paris conference; the targets are set voluntarily and again are voluntarily enacted. The fruits of voluntary agreements on climate change are visible today with predictions that greenhouse gas emissions are set to pass the 1990 levels, which were explicitly targeted by the Kyoto Protocol. The agreement in Paris can therefore be considered not to hold much meaning as its nature is the same as its predecessors.

The nature of the agreement is one issue; another is the need for perpetual economic growth. The very nature of the capitalist economic model breeds the necessity to continuously pursue policies which increase economic growth. With the industrial revolution in the west, came great rewards in terms of economic growth and technological advancement but at the cost of substantial pollution levels across the various business hubs of the world, London for example was notorious for its thick smog caused by excessive manufacturing utilising coal, something China is currently well known for with the index that measures air pollution going off the chart for Shanghai in 2013.⁴ A natural consequence of economic progress would mean releasing more air pollution as a country aims to quickly industrialise, thus those countries like China and India who are developing rapidly, with the former forecasted to become the world's largest economy by 2026,⁵ will have less of an incentive to cut emissions than those who are considered already developed, like the US, UK and Germany. Not only that, but domestic circumstances of a country may influence the decision taken by it during a climate change conference, for example Britain is more favourable towards tackling climate change than it was in the 1990s, partly due to its heavy reliance on coal diminishing over the years, as signalled by the closure of the Kellingley deep coal mine.⁶ the last of its kind.

To conclude some may argue that climate change is a myth, but for those that believe it to be true, holding capitalism responsible for tackling the issue is like allowing the murderer to pass judgement and sentencing upon himself, a system which exacerbated the issue is not the solution to tackling it as the past 25 years testify to. For the agreements to hold any substantial value or actually have a real impact on tackling climate change, they must be binding rather than voluntary with real repercussions if a country was not to adhere to them. However, the nature of capitalism will not permit this, as it will go against a fundamental aspect of its nature, the need for continuous economic growth.

Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Tanish Choudhry

¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52815#.VnBgQv9if3s>

² <http://unfccc.int/timeline/>

³ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/14/we-are-the-climate-change-complacency-we-seek/>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/dec/12/china-coal-emissions-smog-deaths>

⁵ <http://uk.businessinsider.com/chinas-gdp-is-expected-to-surpass-the-us-in-11-years-2015-6?r=US&IR=T>

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-york-north-yorkshire-35124077>