

Climate change campaigners should be cautiously optimistic after the latest UN Climate Summit

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World leaders met in New York on 23 September for a 'Climate Summit' with the aim of discussing some of the measures that will be contained within a new climate change agreement in 2015. **Federica Genovese** writes that while the summit provided little in the way of new commitments, it nevertheless demonstrated that the international community of climate policy supporters is growing ahead of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in December.



On 23 September, world leaders gathered in New York City with one issue on the agenda: "catalysing action" on climate change. The so-called Climate Summit was meant as a warm up to the Lima UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference in December of this year. Specifically, the one-day meeting offered heads of state the opportunity to announce their directions on greenhouse gas emissions containment. Although it was not a part of the formal UNFCCC negotiation process, the gathering was overall in the spirit of the new Platform for Enhanced Action established in Durban in 2011.

As often in the [recent history](#) of the climate change regime, the outcome of the summit was mixed. On the one hand, states provided some information on their current or future industrial policies, and the UN drew more awareness to the climate change issue. This objective was achieved with the help of cross-national demonstrations and, last but not least, the speech of the UN special envoy, Leonardo DiCaprio. Hollywood aside, the press attention was paramount and the [People's Climate March](#) became the largest climate change public event in history.

On the other hand, the national leaders inside the UN headquarters avoided any reference to factual national "contributions." This was certainly expected: at the negotiations in Warsaw in December 2013 the United States had successfully bargained that the deadline for submission would be moved back to the first half of 2015, due to the upcoming Congressional elections. Hence, despite the public resonance of the New York gathering, countries did not discuss the implications of further policy integration in the imminent future. As a consequence, the world is still far from knowing what types of "contributions" will be debated in Lima, and thus what sort of targets will be set in 2015 and implemented in 2020.



Climate march in London, Credit: askbeforepresuming (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

To be sure, the fact that countries did not elicit concrete information on future targets does not mean much for the substantive impact of the Climate Summit. The UN proved to be able to foster the conversation between a representative group of global political leaders and hundreds of civil society organisations and investors. Moreover, one important output was a series of [political statements](#) – something researchers are increasingly interested in (see for example [here](#)). These statements show one clear thing: opinions are converging on a "hybrid policy architecture" for the 2015 Paris agreement, which would include a bottom-up system of national pledges, and top-down provisions for monitoring, review, and verification of pledged emission reductions.

This approach has much merit. In fact, many scientists have written about the hybrid policy framework for several years now. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that several hurdles are on the horizon. From an economic point of view, achieving such a climate policy regime requires a strong incentive for countries to comply with non-binding international rules. High compliance needs strong ambitious commitments, such as a global price on greenhouse gases, a significant expansion of renewable energy and nuclear power, and the wide use of low-cost technologies to control emissions. How to practically meet these commitments at an affordable cost is yet to be figured out.

On the political end, there are still a number of disputes that require sustainable political solutions. One large problem is the long-lasting division between the developing and developed world over emissions reductions, which has roots in the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, when the industrialised nations alone agreed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. As a result, since the 1990s, emissions have been increasing in the emerging economies of the developing world, which, led by India and China, argue they should be able to continue growing, just as the developed countries did, without having to reduce their emissions.

But political disputes exist within countries as well. In a [recent paper](#), Michael Bechtel, Ken Scheve and I studied the climate policy preferences of citizens of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States based on a [new original survey](#). We found that the domestic conflict over costs and norms of climate policies is a strong predictor of citizens' support for international climate agreements. Consequently, shaping a new international climate change treaty will require serious domestic efforts especially within democracies where implementing mitigation and adaptation has strong distributional consequences.

Should then the New York gathering make us hopeful with the pace of global cooperation and negotiations on climate change? One should probably feel cautiously optimistic. The People's Climate March certainly drew more public attention than any other climate event in recent history. Media coverage stimulates discussions on the consequences of climate variability, which then generate the salience people need to put pressure on their policy makers to act.

In addition, the New York events show that the international community of climate policy supporters is growing. The conversations within the UN and on the streets engaged business leaders, government elites and environmentalist groups, demonstrating that these actors are not necessarily as far removed from each other as is usually thought. In short, the Climate Summit gives at least a bit of confidence that combining public mobilisation, creative politics and leadership can help provide a solution to the environmental problems the world faces today.

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