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Accelerating the sustainable future we need
Rethinking Global Climate Action
beyond 2020

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Rethinking Global Climate Action beyond 2020

Bonn, 24 June 2019. After a brief celebratory moment following the Paris Agreement on climate change, governmental ambitions have not been anywhere close to avoid dangerous climate change. To the contrary, greenhouse gas emissions are at record levels. The most recent Special Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) demonstrates how a 2°C temperature increase compared to 1.5°C would greatly exacerbate extreme weather, rising sea levels, loss of ecosystems, arctic melting and other impacts. Even if governments were to fully implement their pledges, the world would face a catastrophic rise in mean temperatures of 2.4 to 3.8°C by 2100. Therefore, action by non-state, local and regional actors is a vital complement to governmental action.

Non-state and local action buffer political backlash

With governmental ambitions falling short, the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (MPGCA) was established under the leadership of High-Level Champions for Climate Action, creating a rare interface between policy makers and non-state actors. The aim was to enhance and stimulate ambition with multiple non-state, local and regional actors. Moreover, the Global Climate Action Portal (NAZCA) was set up, which currently records over 13,000 individual and cooperative climate initiatives.

Non-state, regional and local climate actions have, to some extent, been a buffer against the negative effects of political backlashes, particularly in the United States. In challenging political contexts, non-state, local and regional actors can be drivers of action. Yet MPGCA is coming to an end in 2020. Now is a good moment to rethink how a post-2020 climate action agenda should look like.

A post-2020 action agenda will need to strengthen productive linkages between governments and non-state actions and link visionary leadership outside of governments and the UNFCCC to much higher ambition and accelerated implementation. Effective non-state and local actions should inspire governments and give them confidence to adopt more ambitious targets under the Paris Agreement. Following existing regional and national examples, governments can devise outreach processes to understand and encourage the contribution of non-state and local actors within their jurisdictions. Although implementation will take place at the national level, the action space within the UNFCCC remains crucial. As the main multilateral climate process, the UNFCCC wields convening power that attracts the attention of a multiplicity of actors.

Strengthen actors in places where action is needed

With regards to transparency and tracking, strides have been made in recent years. More data is available, conferring a better understanding of the potential and actual contributions by a host of actors. However, important gaps remain. Actions are geographically imbalanced with most taking place in Europe and North America. This may not be a true picture, as many actions in developing countries remain under the radar. Moreover, some actions are not labelled as climate action, but contribute in very real terms to achieving climate goals. Recognising such actions is not only a matter of technically closing the mitigation gap, but about addressing other climate aspects as well. For instance, adaptation actions will be vital in implementation, with over 80 percent of 'nationally determined contributions' (NDCs) referring to them. Better data could help indicate where more action is needed, and where non-state and local capacities fall short.

However, the underrepresentation of actions in the Global South should not lead to a rush into balancing out numerically, through recording more actions or hastily establishing such actions. Rather, it calls for a close consideration of opportunities and capacities to strengthen actors in places where action is needed.

Transformation is not a painless process

Finally, a post-2020 global climate action agenda could maximise synergies with other aspects of sustainable development. All these actions need to be complementary and should at the very least avoid cancelling out each other's benefits. While the MPGCA and its predecessors have emphasised synergies and 'win-win' constellations, trade-offs will be inevitable both in developed and developing countries. Transformation cannot be expected to be a painless process. A post-2020 action agenda should therefore aim to achieve just transition worldwide, by also bringing into dialogue people and sectors that may stand to lose.

Beyond the context of the UNFCCC, climate action is rapidly expanding through fast growing citizens and youth movements. While a future agenda may not fully answer to a growing popular demand for radical action, a strengthened post-2020 agenda could well demonstrate a credible and decisive break with the fuel combustion-based economy. In this regard, a post-2020 agenda is not about incrementalism. It is about bringing a myriad of actors to the brink of a new global economy.