

Editorial

Paris Agreement demands new ways of thinking to meet known challenges



Christiana Figueres

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The Paris Climate Change Agreement is a fundamental departure from old ways of thinking and doing, and heralds the most broadly encompassing transformation yet presented by an international agreement. It is clearly a clarion call for thought leadership.

IDDRI, ahead of Paris, demonstrated its expert command of the key climate issues, objectively informing the negotiations with positive, problem-solving research. Work such as yours from the think tank community undoubtedly helped to achieve success.

But Paris has opened the door to an even bigger challenge. How do we now ensure that solutions to climate change and sustainable development fully complement and fast track each other?

Because the most pressing fact is that time is running out for us to be able to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The task is doable but demanding.

The realization that climate change and development are solvable only when seen as inseparable parts of the same challenge, and the same opportunity, is articulated in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, agreed by nations last September at the UN in New York.

In the 15 years to 2030, achievement of Paris's climate goals calls for unprecedented rates of decarbonization while the SDGs need to deliver equally unprecedented outcomes in well-being and poverty eradication. There is one clear path to this result.

Growth as it is traditionally calculated must be decisively decoupled from fossil fuel emissions. International Energy Agency data for the past two years has shown this is possible, albeit in a period of slow global growth. Bolder decoupling trajectories need to appear soon.

To achieve this, the direction of development in all countries at the granular level must be low-carbon. New investment in manufacturing, power production, infrastructure, farming and distribution must be as low-carbon as the very latest technology allows, encouraged by the most innovative policies, incentives, markets and mechanisms.

This can be a tough proposition for the poorest of the poor where known fossil fuel solutions might seem to be an obvious route but where clean energy choices are actually more compelling and can leapfrog communities to a more sustainable position. This is exactly the kind of problem where think tanks can spell out the answers to governments and citizens alike.

Finance is at the heart of this. The tension between climate and development finance has been marked by the fear that money spent on one is lost to the other.

But the day is long gone when that should be true because the fundamental yield equation is changing decisively in favor of clean energy and sustainability—investing in those solutions is now simply smarter and less risky.

At a national and international level, this favorable direction of investment returns must now be pushed even further through policy and new technology to enhance development in every field and at every level of combined climate and sustainability action.

Importantly, the government and investment audiences for this new thinking are at their most attentive now.

Governments are looking towards the world of applied action as they implement their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and initiate preparations of long-term, low emission development strategies.

Investors everywhere are meanwhile looking for better quality, stable returns in an era of extremely low interest rates and declining returns from fossil fuel-based assets.

And this is the point. Paris and New York complemented by last year's UN Disaster and Risk Reduction agreement in Sendai completed hard and complex but positive and collaborative processes of multilateral diplomacy.

But many of the distinctions between climate and development evaporate as implementation moves into the applied world, where business and investment leaders now look to seize opportunities promised by the negotiations they so openly supported.

This is one the best times to be a thought leader. I offer you congratulations for your past work and will be looking for IDDRI to focus its intellect on this new challenge.

BIOGRAPHY

Christiana Figueres was appointed as the new Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2010, and was reappointed for a second three year term in July 2013.

Ms. Figueres has been involved in climate change negotiations since 1995. Initially a member of the Costa Rican negotiating team, she was also a member of the Executive Board of the Clean Development Mechanism and Vice President of the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties in 2008-2009.

In 1995 she founded the Centre for Sustainable Development of the Americas (CSDA), a non-profit think tank for climate change policy and capacity-building, which she directed until 2003. Before that, she served as Director of the Technical Secretariat, Renewable Energy in the Americas (REIA).

Ms. Figueres began her life of public service at the Embassy of Costa Rica in Germany in 1982. She also served as Director of International Cooperation in the Ministry of Planning in Costa Rica (1987-1988), and was Chief of Staff to the Minister of Agriculture (1988-90).