Collective Action or Collective Distraction?
Creating a Visible and Simple Scorecard for Global Climate Negotiations©

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September 4, 2017

Abstract: The Paris Agreement was groundbreaking in that it was the first time all countries agreed to do something about climate change. Specifically, they agreed to work toward keep warming under 2 degrees Celsius over the next century. To do this, they put together a “strategic plan”: A big goal (two degrees), indicators of success (voluntary pledges or NDCs), a scoreboard (measurement, reporting and verification) that allows everyone to see what is being achieved, and a cadre of accountability (a Global Stocktake every five years, starting in 2023). Nations must accurately report, and believe others are accurately reporting, their NDCs and GHG inventories. Only in this way can global goals be achieved and ambition to achieve more be gradually ratcheted up.

But major political challenges remain as the world puts together the rulebook for the Paris Agreement. The global community has distracted itself by making that scoreboard–measurement and reporting–too complicated. To achieve rapid progress from this global collective action, the author recommends focusing on the obvious culprits and the big players for now: 1. GHG inventories should contain information only on carbon dioxide emissions from coal, natural gas and oil; and 2. The 620 nations, as 80 percent of the world economy and the biggest emitters, should be “named and shamed”–pressed to be the first to cut emissions, and to do more by ratcheting up ambition. The political challenge of transparency and trust to verify countries’ reports is tricky, and ultimately where efforts should focus. This paper examines and analyzes the challenges faced in operationalizing the Paris Agreement, and offers recommendations to focus on the essential and not be distracted by the details at this stage.

The Paris Agreement is a strategic plan for climate action.

When the first truly global agreement on climate change was signed by 197 parties in Paris in 2015, the world heaved a collective sigh of relief. Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the entire global community had agreed to collective action for the first time to keep global warming levels to below 2 degrees Celsius. Previous agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol, to curb emissions from fossil fuel sources had made some modest progress, but the Paris Agreement under the UNFCCC is truly groundbreaking in bringing all countries to the table to agree to cuts.

Under the Paris Agreement, nation states have put together what one might consider a “strategic plan.” Such a plan translates the global community’s vision for addressing climate change to action, with measures of effectiveness. The Agreement’s stated goal of addressing climate change by keeping warming under two degrees Celsius is the world’s collective goal. Each nation’s voluntary pledges or Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to cut GHG emissions are necessary steps to achieving this goal.

How countries deal with the measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) of these NDCs will provide a scoreboard for all to see and measure.1 2 A Global Stocktake will be

1 The term MRV was coined at the COP held in Bali in 2007. MRV is a term used to describe all measures which states take to collect data on emissions, mitigation actions and support, to compile this information in reports and inventories, and to subject these to some form of international review or analysis. Partnership on Transparency in the Paris Agreement. https://www.transparency-partnership.net/measuring-reporting-and-verification-mrv-0
held every five years to report on emissions targets. Eventually, much more must happen than just MRV, but MRV is a very tangible first step toward achieving the general promise of Paris. Between now and COP 23 in Bonn later this year, the annual meeting of the parties, countries will get down to brass tacks to discuss the mechanisms that must be put in place in order to measure performance on these pledges that will operationalize the Paris Agreement by 2018.

A plan for action, but the issues are tricky.

Although disappointing in its glacial speed to address the climate change problem, through the UNFCCC, the global community has developed some interesting mechanisms to support this first-time truly collective effort in climate change action. Article 13 of the Paris Agreement lays out the general guidelines for transparency that is needed for Parties to move forward, such as a publicly accessible registry of national pledges. It is expected that all countries will report on their efforts at the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC.

This plan for action, however, comes with some tricky issues. The entirely voluntary nature of the Agreement means that countries must be given enough incentive to report (and report accurately), yet oversight needs to be subtle enough so as to not make countries drop the agreement altogether.

Nations recognized that cooperation and trust have been problematic in the past with the 1997 Kyoto Protocol’s failure to address the climate problem. The Kyoto Protocol was legally binding, yet nations failed to comply. It was an agreement signed by 192 parties, but only developed countries were asked to cut emissions, and to report on them. The Protocol covered only 14% of the world’s emissions, and only developed countries were bound to cut and report on emissions.

At the time, no one imagined that China would grow at such an unprecedented pace, emitting GHGs at an equally unprecedented rate along the way. As a result, now the world’s largest emitter is outside the Kyoto Protocol, as are other large emitters such as India, Brazil, South Africa and other rapidly emerging economies.

Acknowledgement of the Kyoto Protocol’s failure to achieve the global goal lies in the language of the Paris Agreement which points to “common but differentiated responsibilities” that led to the idea of voluntary pledges by nations—pledges that each nation felt it could keep. But the operationalizing of the Paris Agreement lies in how MRV plays out, and the question is how to keep a scorecard that is visible and public, and how to let other nations verify that self-reported score?

To measure progress, a public and simple scorecard is needed.

Measurement, Reporting and Verification (MRV) is at the heart of the success of the Paris Agreement. It allows countries to keep a public scorecard. And if countries know that each other’s self-reported goals and score keeping are true, they build trust. They then know that everyone is honestly reporting on progress towards that collective global goal. Once this trust is built, it will allow nations to increase ambition—to pledge more and achieve more, and to build that cadence of accountability where nations come together to achieve their collective goal.

Through the Paris Agreement’s requirement for enhanced transparency, Parties will clearly see who is willing or able to deliver on pledges. Whether Parties find the scrutiny too much will be revealed, as the tension between the desire for transparency and the backlash over potential “naming and shaming” may come to a head. Just where that precipice is to nudge nations to report, or to push them over the edge and out of the Agreement still remains to be seen. To preempt that failure to comply, the Paris Agreement’s enhanced transparency framework describes flexibility and clarity. Verification will be important—and countries can use various mechanisms under the UNFCCC to help them report.

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accurately—the first step in getting nations to deliver on their NDCs—which is ultimately the biggest challenge for the Paris Agreement and its Parties.\(^6\)

**Simplify the Carbon Accounting: Too many nations, too many indicators.**

While major political challenges of verification and trust loom, some streamlining of technical challenges could be done to make progress. One such challenge is presented by the various ways in which NDCs have been defined and described: both as absolute cuts in emissions, and as increases in efficiency. Somehow, these will have to be operationalized, so that annual reports on compliance can be compared for impact. Parties have met since Paris’ COP21 to address questions of uniformity of measurement and reporting. The UNFCCC secretariat has been charged with keeping a registry of reports, adhering to GHG inventory standards that were outlined by the IPCC back in 2006.\(^7\) However, all manner of reporting of NDCs has been observed— from the U.S.’s absolute cuts of 26-28% over 2008 levels by 2025\(^8\) to China’s reduction of 60-65% energy intensity use by 2030 and everything in between. The EU also promised absolute cuts of 40% reductions over 1990 levels by 2030, much like the US. India’s was more along the lines of China, promising 34-36% intensity cuts. This lack of standardization was the direct result of voluntary pledges to keep countries in the game. Now different performances must be standardized to determine progress and chart what must be done to meet the long-term goal. Countries will work on this issue through the UNFCCC’s Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), which is charged with operationalizing the Paris Agreement.

Currently, all nations are involved in MRV processes, but some are better equipped than others to do the carbon accounting that will be necessary. In other words, the mechanisms currently being discussed are bogged down in details when they really should be addressing the basics first—the big emitters and the major GHGs. Instead, several institutions have sprung up to address this issue, such as GHGMI, which runs online courses and certification in training courses for carbon accounting, and has trained several thousands of people in over 100 countries.\(^9\)

Eventually, all nations—large or small—must put out reports, and should not be discouraged from making the necessary cuts. After all, it took over 20 years to get to this point where all nations have agreed to take action. However, not all countries are ready to do the intricate carbon accounting that is being called for. Further, by focusing on such intricacies, the global goal remains as unaddressed as before, and misleads one into believing some progress is being made.

**Focus on the big emitters and the big culprits—and make the scorecard simple.**

While the smaller emitters need to eventually be able to do accurate carbon accounting, today’s main task is to get the biggest emitters, whether historical, current, or emerging, to buy into the proposed structure and framework. Small Island States and Least Developed Countries were exempted from this reporting altogether—which makes sense. Together, the G20 nations emit about 80% of the world’s carbon dioxide.\(^10\) They are the largest 20 nations in terms of GDP, accounting for 84 percent of global GDP.\(^11\) It then follows that an equivalent amount of


\(^7\) IPCC: http://www.ipcc-nggip.iges.or.jp/public/2006gl/pdf/1_Volume1/V1_1_Ch1_Introduction.pdf

\(^8\) NDC Registry (interim): http://www4.unfccc.int/ndcregistry/PublishedDocuments/United%20States%20o%20America%20First/USA%20First%20NDC%20Submission.pdf

\(^9\) Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy, ibid.


effort should be spent on their carbon accounting and MRV. Some of these G20 nations lag behind others in their carbon accounting capabilities, but a phased approach to this accounting may well be the best course of action—first the more developed ones in the G20 group, then the developing ones, and finally, the rest of the world. The low hanging fruit is what nations need to gather first—get the big emitters, then focus on the smaller emitters. The pay off is greater that way.

To continue to simplify and achieve rapid progress, another recommendation is to determine what will have the most effect with the least effort, and to not get bogged down in the details—just yet. Since it is widely accepted that 20 percent of an effort produces 80 percent of the result, a focus on the three biggest GHG culprits is encouraged—carbon dioxide emissions from coal, natural gas, and oil. Emissions from these sources, rather than from all fuels, should be incorporated into national inventories. Even though IPCC guidelines and national inventories currently include all GHGs, and eventually all emissions should be brought into the equation, for now, and to make more rapid progress, we need to simplify the inventories. This will help with rapid carbon accounting at the facility and sub-national levels and so, at the national levels.

A public scorecard will help ratchet up ambition.

A public scorecard will help nations persuade each other to ratchet up ambition in an agreement that is politically but not legally binding. Standards, compliance and transparency are not new ideas when it comes to international agreements. These ideas are often encountered in trade agreements, where standards count for a lot, and nations need to verify them. However, in this particular game, where countries set their own standards, and self-report accomplishments against their self-set standards, lessons from trade agreements do not apply. This unique situation, with its own set of rules and behaviors has no real precedent. Unlike trade agreements, which can impose penalties, this new avatar of climate negotiations has no weapons—only persuasion, or ‘name and shame.’

Conclusion: Simplify the scorecard to attain global goals.

For those creating the rulebook for Paris, two simplifications are essential: first, simplify the accounting itself and begin with the big culprits of the big GHG emitting fuels—oil, natural gas and goal. Second, put the G20 at the center of carbon accounting and MRV to highlight those nations that renge on their promises. Naming and shaming them publicly would encourage them to come to the COPs with substantial cuts, rather than do business as usual. The May 2017 negotiations in Bonn were carried out with a view towards taking stock of the collective efforts of parties in relation to progress towards the goal set in the Paris Agreement. At COP23 later this year, governments will meet again to hash out the procedures, guidelines and intricacies of international relations, even as the G20 leadership waffles about its commitments to climate change. Will they ‘name and shame’ each other in moving towards their stated collective goal within such a non-binding framework? At the COP plenaries, where Parties report to each other and to observers of civil society and the media, the scoreboard will be visible and compelling. The world hopes that these governments will get caught up in a cadence of accountability and continue to ratchet up ambition to achieve their common goal for stabilizing the world’s climate. And one way to do this is to make the process simpler, not more complicated.

Acknowledgement and disclaimer: The author thanks East-West Center for editorial assistance in producing this working paper. This paper, incorporates informal feedback from peers, but is not peer-reviewed in the traditional sense. Please use information contained here with this caveat in mind. Views contained here are held by the author and not necessarily by the Center. Direct queries to the author via email: Anukriti_hittle@wustl.edu.

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