The new international agreement for climate change, to be signed at COP21 in Paris this December will likely be another aspirational agreement. However, this should not necessarily disappoint. Although climate change is a global commons issue, global action may not be the most effective way to address it. In fact, the climate issue is unlike others where international treaties have been successful. Unlike single issues such as addressing marine pollution or ozone depleting substances, climate change has a diffuse agenda, making it tricky to address in a specific manner with a single agreement. It also has no direct beneficiary—such as was the case in the Montreal protocol, where the U.S. took leadership mainly because it stood to benefit from a treaty. True, an international agreement signals intent and aspiration, but if it is not binding, the real action will need to happen somewhere else. And that somewhere else may be at the sub-national level, where actions are being taken and change is being implemented worldwide.

The second week of UNFCCC meetings in Bonn ended with some progress in the areas of climate finance, mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage. ADP negotiators asked the secretariat, for the first time, to compile a non-paper that will synthesize the 90-some page Geneva text into a more concise document to take to their respective countries for signing in Paris at COP21. With this usual litany of issues that have been discussed in various forms under the auspices of the UNFCCC since 1992, one does wonder: will it be different in Paris when parties will sign a new international agreement?

At the Bonn meetings, there was no consensus as to what form the new agreement will take, and which parts will be legally binding. This much is clear: an agreement that will legally bind major emitters is the most obviously sought after outcome of the ADP process. However, if the US is expected to be a major player in this agreement, acceptance of such an agreement will most certainly have to come from presidential authority, rather than a climate policy-averse Congress. For the U.S. president to unilaterally approve anything, and not exceed his powers, a new agreement may end up looking suspiciously like the old one, in that it will need to be non-binding and have no monetary obligations (Bodansky, June 2015, C2ES). This begs the question: What is the role, of yet another international agreement, and is it even fair to expect such an agreement to be effective in addressing climate issues?

At the global level, persuasion is one of the few tools available to policymakers, and one that all nations can use. Increased ambition is a goal for this new agreement in Paris, and...
one that is in keeping with the “bottom up” approach of the negotiations where parties will put forward their own nationally determined contributions, in contrast to the “top down” approach of the Kyoto Protocol. This then, is the role of international agreements—to signal intent that can increase ambition, and be translated into concrete action at the local level. For example, the G7 Declaration in Bonn this year, for the first time ever, signaled that it is a priority to decarbonize the global economy (Morgan, June 2015, WRI). Similarly, in November 2014, the U.S. and China bilaterally stated intent to cut emissions at unprecedented levels. While other major economies also need to do such signaling, including the rest of the G20, this is the extent of action one can expect and hope for from the global community, given the inherent nature of international agreements.

So yes, there is a role for an international agreement in the climate issue. However, it may not be as defined or as large as advocates might desire. It is a tricky business to take collective action at the global level, to address some very localized effects, which finally provide a global public good of a stable climate. For this reason, an international agreement is useful more in increasing ambition, intent, aspiration, and promises to strive towards the common goal. It is not necessary for an international agreement to spell out the specifics, but to give overall end goals that collective action must achieve.

Advocates and adversaries alike would do well to keep in mind such a role for the international agreement that will be signed in Paris at the COP21. An aspirational agreement, such as the one that must inevitably be the outcome of COP21, can and should acknowledge, that the real “bottom up” action takes place at the sub national level. To be considered a success, Paris’s COP21 must send a strong signal of global intent, and since the actual work will be done at the local and state levels, it is these actors who should be supported and strengthened to achieve climate goals beyond COP21. If it pushes the aspirations of the global community to the forefront, and bolsters the work of sub-nationals, it will accomplish what is a natural outcome for international agreements and at least provide a framework for ambition. If the Paris agreement does more than this, it will be a welcome surprise.