Post-Paris Impressions

By Jose Aguto, FCNL

Last December, through the generosity of Lindsey Fielder Cook and Jonathan Wooley of the Quaker UN Office, I was blessed and accredited to participate in the "Blue Zone" of the UNFCCC negotiations in Paris (COP21), during the second week. To thoroughly encapsulate the experiences, the Paris Accord, and its consequences is too unwieldy a task, but I hope these impressions of three dimensions are helpful to you.

A Remarkable Diplomatic Achievement

In international relations, the Paris Agreement is a shining monument of enlightened self-interest. Stunningly, the nation-states debated the sufficiency of the 2 degree Celsius warming limit and ultimately embraced as the better aspiration a 1.5 degree Celsius warming limit. Prior to COP21, 187 countries submitted intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Post-Paris, the INDCs became NDCs, tied to a long-term and durable global framework to reduced GHGs with increasing ambition. Many hope that these 187 nations, through the Paris Accord, have delivered the message to the private sector that "the smart money is in renewable energy," to pivot civilization away from the fossil fuels that threaten our future.

The Paris Agreement is also a triumph of US diplomacy. Years of Congressional non-cooperation on climate action compelled the Obama Administration to steer expectations away from an agreement containing legally binding provisions. This regrettable but politically necessary restriction pre-set the stage for modest COP21 ambitions, but also had the positive effect of inspiring the Administration, engaged in bilateral negotiations with key nations such as China, Brazil, and India for years prior to COP21, to secure commitments needed for success. This pro-active US leadership, most notably through the US-China agreement in November 2014, had that amazing effect of catalyzing 187
nations to submit INDCs prior to COP21. The Administration’s key goals were met in the accord.

However, simultaneously, all parties recognize that these NDCs, even if fully met, will not be enough to reach the 2-degree, much less 1.5 degree goal. Bill McKibben, in this New York Times article, speaks my mind:
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/opinion/falling-short-on-climate-in-paris.html?_r=1

Nevertheless, the Paris Agreement is a tangible, unprecedented, and positive step forward by nation-states. Hopefully it will lead to a meaningful shift for climate and cultures world-wide, reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, and moving us toward a renewable energy future.

Is it enough of a step? Nation-state commitment to the Paris framework, their NDCs and increasing ambition, as well as perhaps more critically, the private sector’s embrace of the Paris "message" will be key factors in the answer.

But this is only one aspect of the multi-dimensional story; primarily the mitigation side, studded with technocratic possibilities, corporate opportunities, a rightfully more ambitious goal, a durable path, and presently insufficient steps and pace.

**Adaptation Finance**

Another dimension is about the well-being of human beings living today, presently and imminently harmed by climate disruption. For, as a leader of an NGO in India rhetorically asked me, "My hometown was destroyed by typhoon two years ago. How will mitigation funding help my people?" It is well established that trillions of dollars will be needed for towns and communities like this.

However, our efforts as part of the NGO coalition on climate adaptation finance, on behalf of vulnerable communities, were less than satisfactory. The Paris Agreement adopts a soothing tone regarding adaptation. But with regard to ambitious financing for adaptation the end note is found, if at all, in the adjectives.

By way of reference, COP15 in 2009 rendered the Copenhagen Accord, which though much-criticized, had a strong set of adjectives behind mitigation and adaptation funding:

*Scaled up, new and additional, predictable and adequate funding as well as improved access shall be provided to developing countries . . . to enable and support enhanced action on mitigation, . . . adaptation . . . for enhanced implementation of the Convention. (Copenhagen Accord, Para 8)*

(emphasis added)

At COP21, we were encouraged by the proposed language in the second draft of the Paris Accord, which contained all of the italicized adjectives above, plus two other positive ones.

Developed country Parties shall provide [new,] [additional,] [adequate,] [predictable,] [accessible,] [sustained] and [scaled-up] financial resources to assist developing country Parties with respect to both mitigation and adaptation. Draft Paris Outcome, version 2, Art. 6, cl. 1. (10 December 2015).

The end note, two days later, was a silent clunker. In the final version, all the bracketed adjectives in the sentence above were deleted (see Paris Agreement, Art. 9, cl. 1). What does this mean?

Adaptation is about helping currently vulnerable communities and peoples build resilience to climate impacts, such as through drought-resistant crops, early warning systems, and more durable water infrastructure. Contextually, developing countries need approximately $140-300 billion per year by 2050 in adaptation finance from a baseline of approximately $25 billion in 2012 (UNEP). And of the $61.8 billion of climate finance in 2014 (for both mitigation and adaptation), only 16 percent was directed toward adaptation (OECD). In Paris, those nation-states not wanting an increased global funding commitment to adaptation or mitigation won. And the communities and peoples most directly and oft-times catastrophically impacted by climate disruption, are once again, disproportionately harmed by this decision.
Human Rights and Indigenous Rights

On December 10, 2015, I pivoted to join the efforts of advocates of human rights and indigenous rights. For on that day—International Human Rights Day—the penultimate version of the draft Paris outcome was released, having deleted "human rights" from a pivotal operational clause (Art. 2, cl. 2). Further, text related to the rights of indigenous peoples was being increasingly softened or shorn off.

We could not overcome the paradoxical timing. In the final version of the Paris Accord, the clause stated: "This Agreement will be implemented on the basis of equity and in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances."

Between the penultimate and final versions of this article, the phrase "and on the basis of respect for human rights" was deleted. In the final version, mention of indigenous peoples or indigenous rights were accompanied by soft verbs or verbal phrases such as "acknowledge," "agree to promote cooperation," "recognizes," and "should respect, promote and consider."

If human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples had been kept in this Agreement, they would have been the humane and more ecologically aware lens through which all subsequent actions would have to be considered and implemented. I was told the delegate of one nation objected to human rights language because the implementation of a current mitigation project in his nation was being hampered by human rights concerns. Thus, the exclusion of indigenous and human rights in the Paris Agreement Agreement could be interpreted as elevating mitigation efforts over human and indigenous rights. Might it create (even more?) space to enable a solar farm or REDD project to displace an indigenous community without their free, prior, and informed consent?

The gulf between shall and should is the yawning divide between try and do. If we the world are to embark upon the journey for the "thrival" of future generations, we the people of today must commit first and foremost to each other, with particular care for the indigenous peoples who live most intimately at the interface between human society and the ecosystems upon which we depend.

This endeavor for "thrival" is not merely about shifting our energy source priorities, but also about shifting our hearts and minds back to the vital and fundamental relationship with Creation, in spirit and practice. When Pope Francis said, "when we destroy creation we destroy ourselves" it was a negative corollary of what indigenous peoples have been practicing since time immemorial: Treat the earth well. It was not given to us by our ancestors. It is loaned to us by our children. More than ever we need to honor and respect indigenous lifeways in right relationship with creation—not to replicate per se, but to unfold and evolve into the many practices within our own lifeways.

The Paris Agreement is indeed a marvel of international, diplomatic, and corporate-government negotiating success. It is a significant, but modest, and admittedly insufficient first step. And in failing to commit to increased funding to help the most vulnerable communities build resilience to climate disruption, and in the exclusion of human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples in critical operative text, it has not succeeded in moving our hearts and minds in right relationship with each other and our Earth, which is where ultimately, for the sake of thrival, we need to be. May we as people of faith seeking fellowship and friendship with the humble, the gifted, the vulnerable, and the powerful, post-Paris, step into this vocation.

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resilience to climate disruption, and in the exclusion of human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples in critical operative text, it has not succeeded in moving our hearts and minds in right relationship with each other and our Earth, which is where ultimately, for the sake of thrival, we need to be." -Jose Aguto, FCNL, in Post-Paris Impressions