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## ***‘Bottom Up’ Paris Agreement and the New Era of Climate Actions***

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### **Summary**

Virtually all recent, major climate actions are associated with the Paris Agreement. While previous international climate agreements like the Kyoto Protocol issued a ‘top down’ mandate for developed countries to meet certain standard emission reduction targets under a specific timeframe, the Paris Agreement hinged on a ‘bottom up’ logic of voluntary climate pledges (Nationally-Determined Contributions) from all countries without specific pre-requisites or deadlines. What happened in, or in the run-up to, Paris? Why does the Paris Agreement hold considerable strength despite its voluntary nature, and what does it mean for global climate actions?

The Paris Agreement ushered in a new era of climate actions by blurring the outdated differentiation between ‘developed countries responsible for reducing emissions’ and ‘developing countries with the right to development’. Amid a climate crisis, the Agreement rightly compels all countries to take actions, albeit with flexibility in targets, action steps, and timelines, in recognition of sovereign policy space and unique development trajectories. Through domestic deliberations to compose NDCs, countries are conditioned to take stronger climate ownership and accountability – making the Agreement less of a superficial, ‘forced-from-above’ commitment. While it has yet generated sufficient climate actions to achieve global net zero emissions by 2050, the Agreement laid the architecture for increased climate ambitions over time, primarily through a periodic review system where climate laggards are vulnerable to being ‘named-and-shamed’. Global momentum for

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substantially stronger climate actions is building, as development and sustainability become increasingly recognized as complementary, not contradictory, goals.

**Keywords:** Paris Agreement, bottom up, Nationally-Determined Contributions, climate actions, naming-and-shaming

## How ‘Bottom Up’ Paris Began

The seed for a ‘bottom up’ climate agreement grew in the run-up to the 2009 Conference of Parties (COP)-15<sup>2</sup> Copenhagen, with a tense state identity reconfiguration amid a shifting normative environment. Multiple actors, including the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC)<sup>3</sup>, began arguing that the 1997 Kyoto Protocol<sup>4</sup>, then-international climate agreement which issued a ‘top down’ mandate for developed countries to meet standardized emissions reduction targets under a specific timeframe, had failed to prevent a ‘climate crisis’. Under the Protocol, developing countries pursued a common cause: preserving their ‘right to development’, while pushing developed countries to atone for past emissions which generated their current wealth (framed as ‘historical responsibility’), either through domestic emissions reduction, or carbon credit purchase<sup>5</sup> from and/or financial assistance for developing countries. The Protocol was predominantly based on the assumption that emissions reduction is a trade-off with development.

Once climate crisis was declared, developed countries began pushing developing countries, primarily the emerging ‘BASIC’ economies of Brazil, South Africa, India, and China to forego their ‘developing’ identity and take more climate responsibilities (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). BASIC went defensive, while Pacific Island and African Union states began pushing the ‘climate justice’ narrative, which entails significantly more financing and technical assistance for materially-weaker, more geographically-vulnerable countries. Many other regional groups with different interests also emerged. Inter-state communications broke down – a climate deadlock was inevitable.

The climate deadlock was broken years later in the run-up to the 2015 COP-21 Paris, as climate crisis and climate justice arguments proved to hold water. Complete climate inaction was denounced as inexcusable amid a climate crisis. Yet, countries rejected another Kyoto Protocol-type arrangement – thus engendering a pragmatic, ‘bottom up’ system where all countries submit voluntary climate pledges (Nationally-Determined Contributions, or NDCs) without specific pre-requisites or deadlines. While compelling all countries to take climate actions, NDCs respect sovereign policy space and unique development trajectories through flexibility for countries to determine the targets, pathways, and timelines. By the end of 2015, over 180 countries deposited their intended NDCs, and agreed to a ground-breaking aspiration to hold global temperature increase to below 2°C pre-industrial level, pursue efforts to limit increase to 1.5°C, and achieve net zero emissions by 2050 under the Paris Agreement.

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<sup>2</sup> COP is an annual meeting of UN Convention Framework for Climate Change (UNFCCC) Parties, hosted in different countries, eg. 2009 (Copenhagen), 2015 (Paris), 2021 (Glasgow).

<sup>3</sup> A UN body that publishes scientific climate change data and analyses.

<sup>4</sup> The Kyoto Protocol divided countries into ‘Annex 1’ developed countries (bound by specific emissions reduction targets for a time period) and ‘Annex 2’ developing countries.

<sup>5</sup> Certificates that governments/companies buy from developing countries (with large carbon stock) to allow them to emit carbon in their areas of operations, in exchange for preservation of carbon stock in the sellers’ areas, to an agreed level.

## **Paris Era: Stronger Climate Ownership, Accountability, and Architecture for Increased Ambitions**

What does the ‘bottom up’ approach mean for global climate actions? For one, it conditions countries to take more climate ownership and accountability. While lacking ‘neat’, standardized arrangements, the Paris Agreement is arguably less of a ‘superficial’, ‘forced-from-above’ commitment by an exclusive circle of negotiating diplomats. As Höhne et. al. (2017) observed, NDCs spurred more domestic deliberations between governments and sub-national actors. This mitigates what Taufik (2016) identified as a common implementation challenge for environmental agreements: a mismatch between ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ norms. Indicating strong international acceptance, the Agreement entered into force<sup>6</sup> in 11 months (including US and China), when the Kyoto Protocol took 22 months (excluding US and China).

Skeptics point to countries’ numerically-conservative NDCs and the US’ withdrawal in 2017 as signs that the Agreement has been a ‘failure’. Current trajectory unfortunately suggests that we are not on track to the Paris goal of net zero global emissions by 2050 (Climate Action Tracker, December 2020 update). However, Paris is not (yet) a failure. It undoubtedly broke climate deadlock and laid an architectural foundation for increased climate ambitions over time. Although not at the most expeditious or ambitious of rates, we have seen a palpable progress tied to the Paris Agreement since its signing in 2015. In late 2020, China vowed to be ‘carbon neutral’ by 2060 and expedite its peak emissions timetable from its earlier target of 2030. This is a massive progress, given China emits 28% of total global emissions (Lowy Institute, 2020). 127 countries which account for approximately 63% of global emissions are either considering or have adopted net zero emission targets (Climate Action Tracker, 2020). Included in the latter category are major economies like Japan, Canada, South Africa, and the European Union.

The Paris Agreement is equipped with a periodic review mechanism, where countries must present and justify their progress (or lack thereof), to other countries. In such forums, climate laggards will have to engage in contestations about the fairness of their existing NDCs and implementation progress, and potentially become ‘named-and-shamed’.

Human rights serve as evidence that ‘naming-and-shaming’ can strengthen international agreements over time, albeit incrementally. The human rights norm evolved from a weak Post-World War II principle of statement in 1945 into stringent treaties and mechanisms, not least the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, 1966 Economic Social and Cultural Rights Covenant, 1966 Civil and Political Rights Covenant, as countries feared reputational damage for non-conformity (Clark, 2001). As Price (2003) holds, weak and pragmatic norms are useful rallying points for higher ambitions.

NDCs also play a role in spurring more domestic and global conversations about how development and sustainability are complementary, not contradictory, goals. Many for-profit companies now part of the climate fold – taking serious steps (not just verbal commitments) toward sustainable supply chains, including by adopting renewable energy and ‘circular economy’ principles.<sup>7</sup> As such, companies are now increasingly considering countries’ climate and sustainability commitments in making decisions on where to invest. A momentum for substantially stronger climate actions is building worldwide.

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<sup>6</sup> Occurred when 55 Parties (which accounted for minimum 55% of total global emissions) ratified the Agreement

<sup>7</sup> The model encourages use of technological innovations to minimize resource use and maximize products’ lifecycle to ultimately minimize carbon-emitting waste.

The US' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, while a setback, did not create a 'domino effect', with all Paris signatories maintaining (or indicating intent to raise) their NDCs. After years of continued domestic climate debates, we can see major progress in the US. New President Joe Biden has signed multiple climate-related Executive Orders, including on the US' re-entry to the Agreement and elevation of climate change to a 'national security' priority, in part to reinvigorate the US' global standing. The US officially re-joined the Agreement on 19 February. While he has yet announced the US' formal carbon neutrality ambitions, during his campaign trail, President Biden proposed the idea of US carbon neutrality by 2050.

## Conclusion

The 'bottom up' Paris Agreement ushered in a new climate era by blurring the outdated wall between 'developed countries responsible for reducing emissions' and 'developing countries with the right to development'. Amid a climate crisis, the Agreement rightly compels all countries to take actions, albeit with flexibility in targets, action steps, and timelines, recognizing sovereign policy space and unique development trajectories.

While it may not appeal to 'tidy thinkers' wanting a swift, coordinated global response based on a static attribution of blame (Rayner, 2010), the Paris Agreement mitigated climate deadlock and conditions countries to take more climate ownership and accountability. Through domestic deliberations to compose NDCs, the Agreement became less of a superficial, 'forced-from-above', exclusively negotiated international agreement. While it has not generated the most expeditious or sufficient of climate actions to date, the Agreement has created an architecture for increased climate ambitions over time, including a periodic review where climate laggards are vulnerable to being 'named-and-shamed'.

NDCs also play a role in spurring more conversations about how development and sustainability are complementary, not contradictory, goals. These ultimately help to build global momentum for substantially stronger climate actions. Climate momentum is also building domestically in Indonesia, not least with the recent appointment of Minister of Finance Sri Mulyani Indrawati as 2021-2023 Co-Chair for the 'Finance Ministers for Climate Action' Coalition<sup>8</sup> and creation of *Badan Pengelola Dana Lingkungan Hidup* (BPDLH) that can flexibly blend various types of climate funds.<sup>9</sup> Indonesia must swiftly seize this momentum to foster meaningful development and bolster its international standing. Indonesia can begin by creating more conducive, cost-effective regulatory frameworks for sustainable supply chains and private development financing, and ratchet its NDCs upwards.

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<sup>8</sup> Originated from discussions in the 2018 International Monetary Fund-World Bank Annual Meeting to help mainstream climate concerns in fiscal/financing policies.

<sup>9</sup> BPDLH is a form of Public Service Agency (*Badan Layanan Umum*, BLU) that has flexibility to accept, manage, and invest in a combination of funds for specific purposes (ie. climate mitigation), including state budget, donor grants, project revenues, etc. This flexibility creates room for bigger impact.

## Notes on author

**Cazadira Fediva Tamzil** was Undergraduate Valedictorian from Universitas Indonesia's Faculty of Social and Political Science in 2015, majoring in International Relations. She also has a Master's in Global Politics with Distinction and Best Dissertation from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK, with a full ride Indonesia Endowment Fund (LPDP) scholarship from the Finance Ministry. Cazadira currently works as a public policy consultant with Asia Group Advisors (AGA), on the nexus between global politics, data-driven analysis, and strategic communications. She regularly advises government agencies, investors, and non-governmental organizations on climate change, renewable energy, human development, and US-China-ASEAN geopolitics. She has co-authored 5 publications on global governance to date, and actively speaks on scholarships, career mapping, and youth development issues. In 2019, she led Indonesia Mengglobal, a foundation that seeks to inspire and equip Indonesians to pursue educational opportunities worldwide.

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