

G20 (Buenos Aires) & COP24 (Katowice) - Leading the world backwards: Governments are merely agreeing to disagree on trade and global warming

Wednesday 5 December 2018, by [GUERRERO Dorothy Grace](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2018).

As world leaders finalised the Group of Twenty's (G20) Agreements [1] in Buenos Aires, Argentina, government and civil society climate representatives started arriving in Katowice, Poland for the 24th Conference of Parties (COP24) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The G20 Agreement reaffirms the commitment of the world's most powerful economies to multilateral trade and a "rules-based international order". The Katowice COP24 on the other hand, will lay out the rule book for the implementation of the Paris Agreement's objective of keeping the global average temperature rise at 1.5°C.

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These two events attended by the most powerful men and women on the planet sum up why we are in deep trouble. The G20 results, although speaking about consensus for a fair and sustainable development, prioritises trade and investments and shows no progress from last year's discussion on climate change and merely mentions the planetary threat of climate change in its text. On the other hand, the COP24 climate negotiations will not be able to trump profit-driven interests to meet the climate emergency due to the limited framework of the Paris Agreement from which the negotiations are set.

From hope to hurdles to equality

For those who remember, when the G20 was founded in 1999 as a response to the Asian financial crisis of 1998, it was envisioned as an international forum that brings together the world's leading industrialised and emerging economies as an effective arena for economic global governance. In its early days, the attendance at the summit was limited to the members' finance ministers and central bank governors.

In 2008, the Chair of the London summit [2], Gordon Brown, promoted it as a vehicle to reform financial markets to avoid a repeat of the 2008 meltdown. There was a pledge not to impose protectionist measures in order to prevent a retreat to the economic isolationism of the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s. Since he came to power, Donald Trump, the leader of the biggest and

most powerful member has been threatening partner states with protectionist measures and withdrawal from various multilateral forums which the US is a part of “to stop other countries from taking advantage of the US on trade”. The commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based international order in the closing day of this year’s G20 is seen as a survival of the multilateral trading system.

An interesting development from this week’s G20 summit is that for the first time, the body confirmed that the WTO is failing in meeting its goals. Trump agrees on the ‘failing’ part. His argument is to get rid of the WTO and instead to do everything by bilateral trade deals. This follows a perspective that the US can use its power more effectively in bilateral negotiations since the US could be outnumbered in consensus and majority-rule processes. Trump’s threat of US tariff increases is not going to be reversed. And under his government, the US will block any role for the WTO in future trade deals. The trade war, therefore, is not over. But, this is different from what the movements against free trade are criticising the WTO for. Rather the very goals of the WTO are the problem. They are not meant to solve poverty and inequality and never will.

This, however, did not alter Trump’s skepticism about climate change and will still not bring him back to the Paris Agreement. Not that the Paris Agreement holds the key to solving the climate emergency. Merely keeping multilateral processes going should not be the end goal. It is important too to check the achievements and failures of all these summits both on the substance of the goals they started with and whether these goals address the depth and scope of the crises of growing inequality and global warming. A critical discussion about where all these processes are at, vis a vis the need for a change of direction to our rapidly changing world, is sorely needed.

The lack of substantial action on climate change is deadly

The best time to have started reducing greenhouse gas emissions would have been more than two decades ago when climate change started to become the concern of governments with the annual UN climate negotiation. The second-best time is now. The United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [3], the gold standard of climate science, have consistently identified very frightening scenarios about the impacts of climate change and that all of them are already today’s realities. As in the past, the latest IPCC Report that came out this year also lays out the vast gap between the climate emergency, what is being done now and what it would take to keep the earth’s temperature below the 1.5°C limit as an aspirational target in the 2015 accord, with 2°C as the backup target.

The already manifesting signs of catastrophic climate change – like the collapse of rainforests and coral reefs, rapid melting of the ice sheets that would swamp coastal cities around the world, and heat extremes that could lead to millions of climate refugees – are already making newspaper headlines regularly. These breakdowns that are occurring much more quickly than expected are making climate scientists think that the goal of limiting warming to 2°C is already disastrous. The Paris pledges were never sufficient (as I’ve argued before) even to keep warming below 2°C. Governments have not even managed to meet the low bars they set for themselves.

Even from a purely economic point of view, the cost of climate denial is already enormous. There are even critiques that the UNFCCC underestimate potential future risks and projected to be only moderate up to about 3.0°C of warming. A Policy Brief from the *Review of Environmental Economics and Policy* [4], the official journal of the Association of Environmental and Resource Economists and the European Association of Environmental and Resource Economists, discusses that the data could be higher if tipping points (situations where impacts are unstoppable or irreversible) are also

included.

According to the study, which used existing climate/economic models, the projected economic damage will cost the world \$535 trillion by the end of this century. Yet the far from adequate climate finance commitments of \$100 billion made at COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009 are still not being met. Even the new \$200 billion promised by the World Bank at the opening of COP24 won't be enough. Meanwhile developing countries are already struggling to address the already mounting costs of climate change to lives, livelihoods and their commons now.

The non-binding Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs) agreed by countries in Paris three years ago, could result in a 3°C global rise in temperature. Even now, the human costs in terms of death and damage from climate-related events, especially in the global south, is already unacceptable. World leaders, especially Trump and the other industrialised countries, who are continually pushing for fossil fuels and denying that a just transition should happen immediately are essentially stealing from the future.

Governments and corporations in the extractive industry sector continue to ignore climate justice campaigners who have been calling for an end to the fossil fuel-determined economy and the stoppage of finance for fossil fuels. To some extent, there are breakthroughs on the political debate on coal, as more people now understand how damaging it is. However, that is not stopping investments in coal. A related step back is the new narrative of investing in gas as a cleaner source of energy and alternative to coal. This is a setback because new gas will also keep emissions shooting up.

People's right to a sustainable planet

The UN climate negotiations are now on their 24th annual occurrence and the world is not getting anywhere near appropriate solutions to global warming. The 'green growth' approach to climate protection has failed to make meaningful progress. This is because putting economic value to nature and ecological services merely commodified nature. It increased the efficiency and productivity of corporations and increased energy and resource use globally. Furthermore, it did not stop transnational corporations from producing profits from nature.

Despite the widespread recognition for renewable energy, fossil fuel-based energy consumption has continued to rise and expand. The G20 agreement also offers very limited space for the world to take a different track. What we are witnessing are the big, bad fixes that result from a widening gap between needed action and the incapacity of governments to deliver on their own already weak commitments made under the Paris Agreement. This is because they refuse to consider solutions that take profits out of the equation.

How energy is generated and used, by whom and for what, still depend on energy systems that must be radically reshaped. The primacy of false economics, of profit-driven energy generation and use over science and our human right to live on a sustainable planet, must be reversed. The civil society groups here in Katowice have collectively made the People's Demands for Climate Justice. It is high time governments and business pay attention as we are running out of time.

Dorothy Grace Guerrero, 04 December 2018

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<https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2018/dec/4/leading-world-backwards-governments-are-merely-agreeing-disagree-trade-and-global>

Footnotes

[1] https://g20.org/sites/default/files/buenos_aires_leaders_declaration.pdf

[2] <https://www.ft.com/content/7c164bb2-deb0-11e8-b173-ebef6ab1374a>

[3] <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>

[4] <https://academic.oup.com/reep/article/12/2/371/5025082>