The Seventh Generation

"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."
—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy

Endless Bad Zoning Decisions

The Welcome Wagon to Climate Change and the Failure of COP 21

Dick Platkin

MILLIONS OF SMALL LAND USE DECISIONS in US cities and the entire planet comprise a significant factor guaranteeing the failure of the climate talks that recently took place in Paris. Called COP 21, short for the Conference of Parties, this event occurred 21 years after the first United Nations conference on climate change.

The approach of COP21, like the previous UN conferences, was to hammer out a broad agreement among the participants. So far, prior pacts have been inconsequential because they were vague and unenforceable. In fact, global CO_2 levels, temperatures and extreme weather events have continued to rise as fast as the piles of accords from the previous UN climate conferences.

The reasons for this failure are complex. Following are some of the most common – but not fully convincing – explanations.

First, with over 195 participating countries, and many more NGOs and private firms, a COP21 consensus over CO2 targets and Green House Gas (GHG) reductions was impossible to obtain beyond upbeat agreements patched together with weasel words.

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The lowest common denominator is the only option that could obtain support from the participants.

Second, CO2 reductions are only limited to production, not to consumption. Countries like the US, that export significant industrial goods and also import an enormous amount of manufactured goods, disguise their cumulative and individual carbon footprint by "out-sourcing" it. Thus, the US reduces its COP 21 and similar climate targets by foisting them off on producer countries that are then stuck with unreachable goals.

Third, closely related to the separate treatment of Green House Gases linked to production and consumption, there are the fundamentally different perspectives of advanced industrial countries and currently industrializing countries. The former, like the US, are intent on preserving their legacy of affluence. In contrast, the industrializing countries, such as India, are undergoing rapid economic growth. While this plays an important role in lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty, it is also energy intensive. This is why India remains adamant about the continued extraction and burning of coal for the energy it needs to grow its economy. Like nearly all other countries, they see their immediate economic needs clearly. Lowering GHG levels is not only on the distant horizon, but India also cannot see any way to pursue climate programs without cutting into economic growth.

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Fourth, certain industrial sectors, especially petroleum and automotive, have extraordinarily deep pockets and political influence when it comes to maintaining a carbon intensive business model. In some countries, especially the US, their armadas of lobbyists, consultants and hired pundits are successful at slowing down the implementation of Green House Gas reduction goals and programs. Driven by what is alleged to be corporate "greed," they have had broad success in portraying climate change as a dispute among scientists, touting so-called bridge fuels as natural gas, and maintaining auto-centric transportation and land-use patterns through efficient hybrids and the prospect of high tech self-driving cars.

While all of these closely connected factors play a role in understanding the failure of international climate agreements like COP 21, they also point to a deeper economic process that is not clearly faced, analyzed, or addressed at climate change conferences – capital accumulation.

Behind Conference Problems: The Capital Accumulation Process

All capitalist economies have a built-in growth dynamic called the capital accumulation process, and in 2015 this includes the 195 countries that participated in COP 21. To a lesser or greater extent, they all support economic growth. Continuous, incremental economic expansion is not, however, a choice, but stems from the economic system in force, where current profits are perpetually reinvested in new, profitable products and enterprises.

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Even small growth rates result in an enormous expansion of the production and consumption of energy and goods, as well as the generation of massive waste and pollution.

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Even at anemic growth rates – such as the 2 percent per year average in the United States over the past 15 years – an economy doubles in size in 35 years. Over a century, this means the US economy would increase eightfold. Even small growth rates, therefore, result in an enormous expansion of the production and consumption of energy and goods, as well as the generation of massive waste and pollution.

To facilitate this growth, a society's infrastructure, land use patterns and public services must go through comparable upgrades, further contributing to environmental havoc.

When growth rates, however, reach the dizzying levels of China, around 7 percent per year, an economy doubles in size every 10 years. If this level of economic expansion could be maintained over a century, an economy like China's would increase in size by over 2,000 times. The amount of raw materials, energy, skilled workers, markets, land, new buildings and infrastructure required to accommodate this growth, waste, and pollution is nearly beyond comprehension.

To further aggravate these problems, private firms do not consider economic externalities, like pollution, when weighing potential profit and risk for their investment decisions. Except for an occasional lawsuit like British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, or regulations like the Federal Clean Air Act, the trail of waste, pollution and disease caused by the production and consumption of their products is of little concern. At best it is a public relations problem solved through a grant to PBS!

In California, for example, there are several important regulatory tools that, if implemented, could at least slow down climate change. But, the two following Los Angeles case studies illustrate how the economic and political dynamics of an advanced, free market economy sabotage regulatory programs that begin to address catastrophic climate change. In both cases, City Hall's full throttle commitment to "growth" through real estate speculation thwarts these modest regulatory tools.

The California Environmental Quality Act

In California, the most important regulatory tool is the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). In recent years the State upgraded CEQA to require the careful measurement and assessment of the production of Green House Gases, especially in Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs). Lo and behold, these EIR's, whether for private or public projects, report the generation of unmitigatable levels of Green House Gases. The City Council, which is the final decision maker in Los Angeles, then has the choice of approving the project as is with a Statement of Overriding Considerations, rejecting the project because of its excessive Green House Gas emissions, or forcing design changes, such as reducing a project's size, to properly mitigate the production of Green House Gases. Given these choices, the City Council invariably adopts a Statement of Overriding Considerations. A project's alleged benefits, typically vague promises of jobs (which are then never measured), are the rationale to ignore its adverse climate impacts.

Real estate projects routinely get approved despite their dangerous levels of pollution because major investors have enough political clout to perpetuate a "pro-growth, business-friendly" institutional culture at City Halls across the entire country. The investors obviously want to maximize profits, and the results, again and again, are that their priorities trump sound local decisions to address climate change.

The Complete Streets Act and The Mobility Element

A second regulatory requirement in California is that cities must address climate change through their planning process. In practice this means compliance with state laws such as the Complete Streets Act. This act requires California cities to put less carbon intensive transportation modes, largely walking, biking, and transit, on the same footing as automobiles. In Los Angeles the Complete Streets Act guided the preparation and adoption of the city's new Mobility (Transportation) Element.

But like the much grander global climate pacts, the Los Angeles Mobility Element is toothless. It only has one small enacting ordinance. It is not linked to the city's budget or to departmental work plans. It also has no effective monitoring program to determine if its programs have been implemented or if they are working.

What are the Alternatives?

Some progressive economists, such as Robert Pollin in his new book, *Greening the Global Economy,* contend that they can square this circle through a new economic system called green capitalism. So far, however, capitalism's built-in growth dynamic has prevailed over these well-intentioned "work-arounds." But even if these visionaries could finally work out the kinks and succeed at regulating the externalities, such as pollution, out of capitalism, the cure might be as bad as the disease. This is because green capitalism would be forced to restrict incremental economic expansion (i.e., capital accumulation). The result would be a deep market crisis, high unemployment and impoverishment, waves of bankruptcies and foreclosures, political extremism and eventually wars. Where, then, does that leave us?

While I hate to be a prophet of doom and gloom, I think it is critical to describe the objective climate situation as clearly as possible. This means that the real choice facing humanity is maintaining the planet as a livable environment or maintaining free market economies – despite their built-in growth imperative and devastating climate externalities. P2