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COP21: Can this convention help save the earth? - by Susan Bernstein

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In the end of December, representatives of nearly 200 countries convened to draft an agreement aimed to address climate change. The gathering, known as “COP21,” or the 21st session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, committed to take steps to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions (GGEs). Unlike the previous world-wide conference, known as the Kyoto Protocol held in 1992, in which only 35 countries participated and did not include the U.S., China, or India in the final pledge to reduce GGEs more modestly than COP21, all these countries and more have joined the commitments issued at COP21. Reassessments, including reports and updated plans, are

required every five years. Scientists note that emissions are 50% higher than they were when the Kyoto Protocol was adopted.

What it includes: According to summaries in the press, COP21 commits nations to hold the rise of the average global temperatures to well below 2-degrees Celsius or 3.6-degrees Fahrenheit; and to limit the increase in certain “low-lying” countries to only 1.5 degrees Celsius. The 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit is calculated to be the level at which atmospheric warming will not expand. These commitments will have huge economic impacts in the quest to reduce the use of coal, oil and gas. The current debate in Massachusetts, with regard to additional natural gas pipelines and hydropower; and the lack of stronger incentives for the development of wind, solar, and geothermal power, will all play into these COP21 commitments.

What it does not include: Enforcement of these commitments remains to be seen. If the agreements are to become “binding” under international law, will legislative bodies adopt these commitments (will the US Congress agree)? Critics point out that there is no carbon tax and therefore a lack of incentive to prevent GGEs; and no sanctions to ensure compliance. What about financial aid to assist rapidly developing countries which the US looks to for inexpensive labor and facilities to manufacture its goods? And what about providing increased investments in renewable energy sources?

Are the countries of the world better off after the COP21? Surely the dialogue and the commitments, push the awareness and discussion for the international community. Sadly effective results remain to be seen.

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