

“This Is a Moral Obligation for Anybody.”

In this interview Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, discusses the implementation process of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, her personal role and the efforts to involve all actors to participate in actions on climate protection.

Question: Thank you very much for this interview. I would like to start off with a more general question: Despite many international initiatives, both global CO2 emissions as well as the global average temperature continue to rise. Natural disasters increase. Do you believe that humanity can still stop climate change?

Espinosa: I think that stopping climate change is maybe not possible anymore, because of nature, because of the physics of the phenomenon. However, I think that what we are trying to do is to reduce the speed of the process going forward and also as much as possible finding solutions in order to avoid the very catastrophic impacts and effects of climate change. What we want to achieve through the Paris Agreement, and what I do believe is still feasible, is to be able to have a future development that goes away from the trend that we have been doing until now. Being much more conscious about the effects of climate change and low emissions development, that allows us to reconcile the needs of the economy, the needs of the people and at the same time the conservation and preservation of the planet. Therefore, it is to avoid the phenomenon that will continue to be of great harm to millions of people around the world. But yes, I do believe that there are many opportunities. I also believe that this is a moral obligation for anybody who has the possibility to take decisions or to participate in the process towards making sure that something is done in order to inherit the planet in the best possible condition to the future generations.

What is the focus of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015?¹

We are in a moment of transition not only with the adoption of the Paris Agreement but also the early entering into force of the Paris Agreement. Now we have to look at what we need to do in order to help countries implement. However, the UNFCCC is not an implementing agency of projects. But at the same time, we do have the responsibility to follow-up to the commitments that countries have made under the Paris Agreement. And therefore, I see it also as our obligation to be able to get to know what the challenges for countries are and to bring possible partners closer to them that can be helpful in their efforts to fulfill those commitments.

On the one hand, we still have to support a company in a very complex process of negotiation; of the rules and procedures that need to be in place and the common understanding that needs to be achieved in order to make the Paris Agreement fully operational. Furthermore, about the different issues, e.g. on transparency for reporting of reduction of emissions or of the actions that the individual countries will be taking on support for developing countries, be it financial or in terms of capacity building or technology transfer. There is still a lot of work to be done in the area of negotiation.

Then there is this other area that I was mentioning about implementation. At the end what we really need is to be able to start as quick as possible the transformation on the ground. And then, of course, we also need to foster and provide a certain platform for the engagement of the non-party-stakeholders which are very important in order to be able to achieve the goals that we have in the Paris Agreements.

¹ UN Doc. FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1, <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/10a01.pdf>

Do you cooperate with other UN organizations?

Yes. What we are trying to do now is when we engage with countries individually then also engaging with other UN entities that are present on the ground, such as UNDP and UNEP. But not only those, because depending on the reality of each country there are others that may be of particular help. Our vision is that in doing this we not only reach out to other UN entities, we also reach out to international organizations beyond the UN System and also to the private sector which are the ones that very often are central to the efforts that need to be done at the country level.

You are Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC for about roughly one year. What made you accept this position and which first experiences did you gain so far?

As a diplomat for over 36 years, I have spent a lot of my career in multilateral issues. I had the chance of first getting involved with this climate change agenda when I presided over the conference in Cancún in 2010 (COP 16). It is an issue that has to do basically with all the areas of economic activity, with society as a whole. That is very central to the transformation needed in order to generate better conditions of people's life. This is a very central agenda for the future of humanity. I just saw it as an opportunity to try to contribute to something that has really very important meaning for those who are coming after us and I just see it as a great privilege to be able to do this now.

How would you define your role as Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC and what are your ways to influence actors? In the end, the state parties of the UNFCCC decide whether, and if so, how climate protection agreements will be implemented.

As Secretariat we have the responsibility of providing inputs to the process but also to provide certain guidance. This is a very big and complex issue. Once we get the agreements, for instance, now we are working on the definition of the procedures and methodology that we should be using to make the Paris Agreement operational. The Secretariat has to provide some kind of guidance, inputs for discussion by the parties. Our role in that is to be helpful in bringing the agreements that have been reached into processes that allow for implementation.

At the same time—and this is the new part of our task—we try to engage with the countries individually and try to see what the challenges are and how we can be helpful in identifying partners, that can be of value to them. I think this is our way of influencing. At the national level it is not easy for many countries to really define a way of starting implementation. They have put forward their nationally determined contributions, but it is not evident how to go from that program or those objectives into actual individual actions or programs. Our role as facilitator is also to gather relevant information and to bring it to the attention of the parties.

In a former interview you called the Paris Agreement a “historic agreement”. Why?

Well, I really believe this is a historic agreement. If you think that we were negotiating for over 20 years until we reached an agreement, a certain regime that unites all countries— developed countries, developing countries from all different regions of the world—into the same objectives, of trying to limit temperature rise in the atmosphere, I think it is historic.

We have the Convention and Paris Agreement but then we really needed to have some more specific commitments. Finally, countries, everybody got together behind a scheme and behind a vision on what we need to do and assuming that responsibility lies by all the members of the international community. This is the first time that something like that happened. And it's also the first time that we have such a complex agreement that is actually covering most of the, if not all of the areas of activities, all of the areas of economy. This is really why it took so long to get to the Paris Agreement. It is a very complex agreement. The fact, that today we see

businesses and investors and people from different areas of the economy aligning their actions to the Paris Agreement, also shows the historic importance of this accord.

The actual goal of the 2015 Paris Agreement to keep a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius seems to be unrealistic. The national plans of action of the UNFCCC parties are currently far from being sufficient. According to UNEP’s “Emission Gap Report”², global warming is expected to be about 3 degrees Celsius until 2100. What are the various binding goals and deadlines up to the year 2100 and how do you think these goals could be fulfilled realistically?

Well, it is true that the current national climate plans are not taking us yet to that objective. However, I think it’s important to be very conscious about the fact that the transformations that have taken place in the last years have been very dramatic. That has happened at a much faster pace than we were expecting. Take the example of solar technology. Just five years ago nobody would have thought that you could produce cheaper energy, cheaper solar energy even than coal which is happening in India, a country that has the enormous challenge to provide energy to all. What we are seeing are clear signals that the necessary transformations can take place at a much faster pace.

We also see, and that is encouraging, that not only countries but also the businesses and investors and other actors, local governments and subnational authorities are aligning their actions along these commitments. This is also a signal that we may be able to fulfill the commitments and that the ambitions hopefully increase. This is what the Paris Agreement is providing for: It provides a framework for the INDCs but also a framework for reviewing those INDCs and for raising ambitions.

The milestone we have in this year is the COP23 here in Germany in Bonn where the foundation of this regime to make the Paris Agreement operational needs to be laid. Next year we will have with the COP24 in Poland – the clear deadline to approve all those procedures and mechanism. In Poland we will also have the first stocktaking of how countries have been progressing in the implementation of their commitments. For 2020 we have the goal that countries provide new revised versions of their NDCs. In 2023 we will have the global stocktaking. Eight years after Paris has been adopted we will have the possibility of making a very formal thorough review of what has been achieved. In Paris a need for countries to define long-term low emission strategies also was established. Some countries are already doing that, some countries are already reviewing their NDCs to raise ambition. I think we have a very dynamic and very well build process towards the coming years.

The National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) of the parties to implement the Paris Agreement are very different – especially if you compare industrialized and developing countries. Could the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) become a connecting element here?

If you look at the SDGs and you see that we have SDG 13 that relates to climate change, there is a lot of evidence about the fact that it is actually one single agenda. If you then go to analyze the reality on the ground, the truth is that there is only one agenda. There is not one agenda for development and one agenda for climate change. When you look at the government and if you are a government official, there is only one agenda. Fulfilling the SDGs and fulfilling the Paris Agreement requires that countries incorporate those elements into their national planning. It will not happen by very isolated actions here and there. It has to become a part of mainstream policies that are done in the countries.

If you look at the SDGs they all relate to climate change. It becomes obvious that climate change is not one part of the economy or one part of the development process but that climate change is really at the center of any

² For further information see www.unep.org/emissionsgap/

development process. Look at the SDG on energy or the SDG that has to do with work, labor, or look at the SDG on transportation and urban planning, everything has to do with climate change.

What we are trying to do, and there I go back to your point about working with other UN entities, with the new Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretary-General, is to create a more integrated work within the UN system so that we can be more helpful to governments. We need to look at these processes in a very comprehensive and integrative manner.

In 2010, you were chair of COP 16 in Cancún, and in 2016, you have already been UNFCCC's Executive Secretary in Marrakesh. If you compare both conferences, do you see any changes of the negotiation processes?

Very much so. When we had the conference in Cancún, it was a very critical moment. We had to restore a lot of confidence in the process. There had been unfortunately no formal agreement at the COP 15 in Copenhagen. There was enormous skepticism about the possibilities of the international community coming together and getting a common perspective on how to address climate change. And there was also much more skepticism about the magnitude of the problem.

In Marrakesh, we celebrated the entering into force of the Paris Agreement less than one year after it was approved which was really surprising. We held the first meeting of the parties to the Paris Agreement. We had very complicated negotiations but everything was about how to make it happen. In Cancún, it was rather about how to restore the process. We manage, fortunately, to lay the foundations for the work that was done after Cancún that led to the Paris Agreement.

During the COP 22 in Marrakesh there was also some special news from one important member state, the US, which announced to withdraw from the agreement. How does this affect your work and the other parties in order to continue the process?

This is a process of over 20 years that has reunited over 190 countries. So for the UNFCCC secretariat there is a clear mandate. There is a very clear responsibility. At the same time, and this is important to bear in mind, the Paris Agreement foresees a waiting period for three years until any party can withdraw. So, the Paris Agreement not only continuous to be in force, but all the parties that have ratified the agreement are committed to it or have obligations towards the agreement.

To me, probably internally, one of the big challenges was to get this message through to the staff to make sure nobody gets distracted. Why? Because the agreement is in force. This is our obligation. We have very clear responsibilities and we should comply with those responsibilities.

During the COP 22, a new partnership between industrialized and developing countries was promoted. What can you say about its concrete implementation? Do you see any progress?

The NDC partnership is a very interesting and valuable initiative by developing and developed countries to try to develop, to build up capacities for the process, to support countries in their implementation efforts. It's an initiative that intends to accompany countries in their efforts to build up their capacities to comply with the agreement. I think, it's a very valuable initiative also because it was launched just one year after the agreement was signed. Preparations for that launching of the NDC partnership were going on even before the agreement entered into force and without a certainty that it would enter into force immediately. But, what I would highlight is that it shows that there was a political will to immediately try to build up some kind of support process for countries. It's very new, so it's not easy to build it up. But it has had a number of meetings. There have been some countries identified, like pilot countries in which to concentrate on in the following months. I think, an initiative like that can only be welcomed.

To fight climate change you argue that cooperation is not only about governments which have to make their contributions. It is also about the involvement of cities, the private sector and civil society. How should this be implemented and do you not think that this approach could lead to tensions with national governments and their jurisdiction?

The agenda that the Paris Agreement puts forward is an agenda of deep transformation of society. Deep transformation of how societies are working, of how the economies are working. It is about a transformation of the habits of individual people in their everyday life. In many development areas, national governments alone cannot deliver on this agenda. It's virtually impossible for national governments to directly guide and be responsible for developing whatever processes are needed at national level to get to this kind of transformation. This Agenda and the SDG agenda provide a very comprehensive and broad framework for all actors at the national level to work together towards a very specific goal.

In that sense, this is very valuable for countries because it cannot be argued that you are having a political agenda on your own. It is an agenda that has been agreed on by the international community as a whole and that is centered on the well-being of people. We cannot be ignorant that in some cases there may be political realities that also play a role in how the actors work together, but it is essential to get as many actors involved as possible.

What are your expectations of COP 23 in Bonn, hosted by Fiji at the beginning of November?

On the part of negotiations, I mentioned already the mechanism, the procedures, and all the understandings that need to be in place to make the agreement fully operational. They are very complex and involve some political balances. So, it is not an easy process.

On the other hand, we need to be able to prepare a good exercise for next year for what we call the facilitative dialogue, which is a first stocktaking of where we stand and how countries are doing. That is very important because it will allow us to identify which are the biggest challenges for countries.

The fact that Fiji is presiding of the conference is highlighting the enormous vulnerability of island countries and of some other areas in the world, especially low-lying lands. It is remarkable that Fiji was courageous enough to say that they would take up this challenge but at the same time it shows that they are doing that because it is really about their survival. This message about this enormous vulnerability of the island countries and low-lying lands is very important. In addition, what I am seeing is a very strong willingness of many actors to be there and to really show their commitment to the Paris Agreement.

My last question would be a personal question: If you had one single wish as Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, what would it be?

Well, it is difficult to make a single wish. I would probably say that I hope that we could get a common understanding about the transformation that is really needed. It's not just any agenda. It's an agenda to transform our societies. And that's very difficult. Human beings tend to resist change and transformation. If we manage, that every person, wherever they are—every child every student, every business person, every person in restaurants, in hotels—will consciously say “Oh yes, I need to do something about it. I need to transform my everyday life.” If we get that, we will be safe. I am optimistic about that because I see that the young people are so much able to adapt to new realities and are so eager to become more responsible in their everyday life. So, I think it's feasible.

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