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Paris Talks: Energizing Cognitive Dissonance

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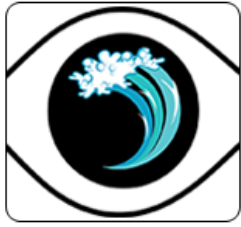


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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: Energizing Cognitive Dissonance

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This special series of posts is produced by [Juliet Pinto](#) (Florida International University) and [Phaedra Pezzullo](#) (University of Colorado-Boulder)

*In collaboration with [International Environmental Communication Association](#), FIU's [Sea Level Solutions Center](#), and [eyesontherise.org](#).
Both Pinto and Pezzullo are attending [COP21](#) in Paris.*

By Juliet Pinto, from Paris

At the opening remarks on Monday by the heads of state, 150 heads of state promised to move forward in positive ways for the climate, building on the 2009 promises to phase out fossil fuels. But those words masked innate contradictions. As Maeve McLynn from Climate Action Network–Europe said, “That can only be achieved if their own governments stop financing dirty

fossil fuels, and there is really minimal movement in that direction. In fact, the main contradictions to decarbonization are the huge subsidies that governments give to fossil fuel industries.”

Indeed, at a panel on the subsidies developed countries currently offer fossil fuel companies, the G20 average for fossil fuel producers from 2013-2014 was more than \$450 billion. As the panelists noted, subsidies can include everything from direct government spending, to tax breaks, state-owned infrastructure, grants, loans and more. Every subsidy creates an incentive to keep producing fossil fuels, from locking in carbon risk by building infrastructure (particularly offshore oil rigs), to keeping coal mines running in the face of declining prices, to masking the risk for financial managers and creating incentives to keep investing in fossil fuels.

At the same time, the science is clear: Both the carbon we already have in the atmosphere, as well what we continue to put there, is a huge risk. As former vice-president Al Gore said today, “The climate crisis is the 800-pound gorilla running right through the middle of the world economy.”

To help the world understand this contradiction, civil society talks have focused on the gap between the remarks by 150 world leaders on Monday, all acknowledging the climate crisis and pledging to forge an agreement to meet the enormous challenges of global warming, with the actual behaviors and actions by those same governments in incentivizing fossil fuel production, elaboration and consumption.

For example, various studies have shown quite clearly that these subsidies, in some cases, are what are keeping fossil fuel production going. One example cited today was the Powder River Basin coal production, where U.S. coal subsidies accounted for 39 percent of total production. That translates into more than 2 gigatons of emissions, not an insignificant number.

Panelists from various think tanks emphasized that if developed countries

truly plan to decarbonize, the dollar amounts spent on these subsidies could be easily transitioned to clean energies. As it stands, clean energy producers are currently unable to compete with fossil fuel producers, as the playing field is so structurally unequal, and fossil fuel companies are paying much lower costs of capital than they should be.

In terms of the COP talks, while the focus for G20 countries is mitigation, they also must provide for developing countries to not only mitigate, but also adapt to the impacts of climate change. In fact, the area that the G77 countries are focusing on most heavily now is adaptation, as the developing world is who primarily bears the brunt of the impacts of climate change. As I've mentioned previously (LINK) the chief fund to aid developing countries with not only the transition away from fossil fuels, but also mitigation and adaptation, is the Global Climate Fund. Panelists today noted the hypocrisy with which Annex I nations have failed to adequately fund the GCF, but yet the billions of dollars they pour into fossil fuel subsidies.

So I conclude my COP21 experience by circling back to how I began it: cognitive dissonance. I live in a G20/Annex I country, whose leader wants a strong climate legacy. At the same time, I live in Miami, a city on the front lines of sea level rise, which in the context of climate change is accelerating and poses a grave threat to the well-being of this community. The United States provides billions of dollars in subsidies to fossil fuel industries.

I, like so many others, struggle to reconcile these notions I watch G20 world leaders speak of "solving" climate change, but whose own governments give away billions of dollars to the carbon-producing industries. How can this be? What will the outcome of COP21 be? The world is watching Paris.

