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Paris Talks: Acronyms, Actions & Akon

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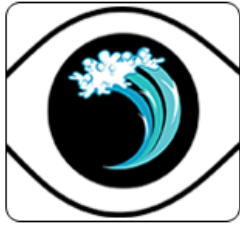


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Eyes on the Rise

Paris Talks: Acronyms, Actions & Akon

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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 (Updated 12-3-15)

At a panel on sea level rise in Miami last year, audience members repeatedly asked what city officials were doing to combat street flooding and other impacts of climate change overwhelming infrastructure. Panelists, including me, listed the pumps Miami Beach is installing, as well as building code changes, upgrades to flood control infrastructure on the canal systems, and

other adaptation measures being implemented.

Another panelist, Sierra Club Everglades Issue Chair Jonathan Ullman, said something that resonated then and now: “Adaptation measures are important. But we can’t talk about sea level rise without talking about mitigation.”

Mitigation is indeed a central focal point of the COP21 talks, as well as a central point of contention. On a global scale, it signifies a transformation of world economies to shift away from carbon-intensive energies in order to keep the world from warming more than 2C. It also signifies trillions of dollars in costs in order to do so.

An economist, Thomas Sterner from the University of Gothenburg, said yesterday on a panel on carbon markets, “We are working on carbon markets to save money. The world is facing very expensive change in its energy systems, and we need to do this in an efficient manner.”

Indeed, financial burdens for decarbonization, mitigation and adaptation strategies are an enormous contentious point at COP21. G77 countries, or the developing world, insist, rightly so, that the Annex I countries (UN parlance for developed countries, the largest historical emitters of carbon) provide financial assistance to shift the rest of the world to renewable energies. Toward this end, the Green Climate Fund was established at COP16 and is intended to support developing countries’ mitigation and adaptation programs and policies, or what is known as “climate finance.”

The UNFCCC set a goal of \$100 billion a year until 2020 to fund the GCF, but where that money will actually come from—public or private sources, for example—is a very contentious issue. So far, only \$10 billion has actually been pledged. The issue’s been further complicated by the fact that some members of the GCF want to use funds for fossil fuel projects. According to the AP, in March of this year, Japan funded three coal-fired electric plants in

Indonesia with \$1 billion they designated as climate finance.

But, in the developing world, innovations springing from previous COP agreements provide possibilities for new mitigation strategies that straddle sustainable development initiatives. Nationally Acceptable Mitigation Actions (NAMAs) are the mechanisms, in the words of COP officials, to allow developing countries to meet their carbon reduction commitments at the same time they provide for development opportunities.

The GCF has funded a series of indigenous groups' mitigation and adaptation efforts. A panel of representatives from indigenous actors yesterday discussed their mitigation practices, which include the use of local expert knowledge to advise best resource use and management, and various initiatives to replace or supplement high carbon agricultural practices with other employment opportunities, such as textile weaving and dyeing in Peru, or community based monitoring and information systems about forest management in Vietnam.

The Indonesia-based Sustainable Wetland Adaptation & Mitigation Program (SWAMP) works in 25 countries to conserve and protect coastal wetlands, which have huge carbon stocks. The program's director, Dr. Daniel Murdiyarso, says the program has had success in not only maintaining ecosystems that naturally trap high rates of carbon, but also preventing that more carbon is released by deforestation and agricultural activities by doing so. SWAMP is developing interactive maps of carbon sinks and ecosystems that they hope will help officials, scientists and land use managers more effectively track, register and evaluate carbon outputs.

Gabon has 88 percent tropical rainforest cover and is the second most forested country in the world. According to the director of the Gabonese National Park Service, Dr. Lee White, strong, sustained legislation that codifies successful forestry management practices is a big factor in this success.

In 2001, the parliament passed forestry laws that obliged forestry industries to adopt sustainable development practices, a success that not only reduced CO2 emissions of 350 million tons between 2000-2010, but also resulted in a 2014 Sustainable Development Law that Lee says, “sets into law every success that we’ve had.” And like the SWAMP program, the Park Service is using maps to aid mitigation attempts, looking at habitats, species, wetlands, biodiversity and carbon.

Surprisingly, Costa Rica, long applauded as an ecological jewel in Latin America, had reached a deforestation rate in the 1980s of 80 percent. Now at 50 percent, officials say they realized quickly they needed to work with the agriculture and livestock sectors to bring that figure up to where it is currently, at 50 percent, with a goal of 60 percent in the next five years. Toward that end, the country implemented a NAMA program called NAMA Café: Low Carbon Coffee, working with coffee farms to change production and processing practices and therefore lowering their carbon footprint.

Proponents say these NAMAs also include adaptation measures and represent sustainable development, as they create jobs and improve standards of living. The hip-hop artist and producer Akon, on a panel today with Favius, works on a NAMA initiative, “Akon Lights Africa” (<http://akonlightingafrica.com/joining-forces-to-fight-back-climate-change/>) to bring solar powered electricity to 15 African countries, with the goal of fostering sustainable development.

However, that’s not to say there are not huge challenges with climate finance. Accessing capital, both in terms of funding projects and funding the fund, is always an issue. COP21 President Laurent Favius implored developed nations to “stand by their financial commitments and increase climate finance.” Accountability also presents challenges, as monitoring, validating and registering are required components for financing but can be problematic, and developed countries have said there is a lack of

transparency and accountability in funding processes.

Apart from financing and transparency, other impacts of climate change, such as sea level rise, present additional problems for sustained success of these mechanisms. For example, various species of mangroves will not be able to survive a 3-foot rise in sea levels, which is projected in the 21st century to happen regardless of mitigation efforts.

This brings us to a final point: While mitigation is key to averting many of the worst impacts of global warming, adaptation measures must absolutely be paid for and implemented. As Dr. Michael Oppenheimer from Princeton University noted during a panel on risk modeling, while mitigation is a top priority, many of the impacts of climate change “are already baked into the systems” until at least 2040. There are impacts of climate change that will happen and are unavoidable, so vulnerable regions must demand greater action on the adaptation front.

That’s certainly true for us in South Florida, a region that is already experiencing impacts of sea level rise on a daily basis, from street flooding to salt water intrusion and peat collapse. Our challenge now is to raise community awareness, by effective and sustained communication and engagement. No easy task by any means, but the global dialogue and action surrounding mitigation, adaptation and resiliency initiatives at COP21 is a hopeful light, indeed.



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