

A REPORTER AT LARGE  
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## THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

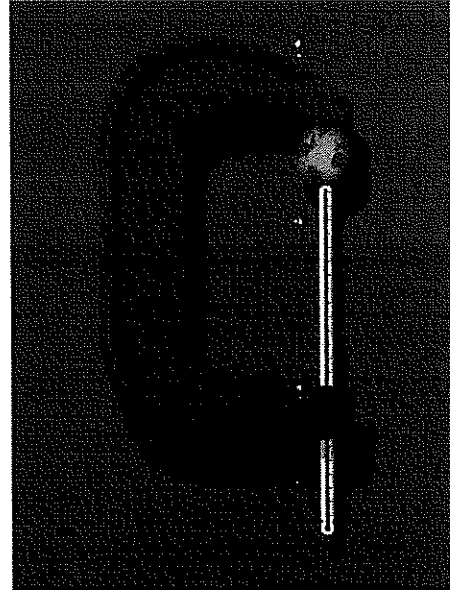
*Can Christiana Figueres persuade humanity to save itself?*

**BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT**

*“I’m very comfortable with the word ‘revolution,’”  
 Figueres said.*

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

**T**he United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, or U.N.F.C.C.C., has by now been ratified by a hundred and ninety-five countries, which, depending on how you count, represents either all the countries in the world or all the countries and then some. Every year, the treaty stipulates, the signatories have to hold a meeting—a gathering that’s known as a COP, short for Conference of the Parties. The third COP produced the Kyoto Protocol, which, in turn, gave rise to another mandatory gathering, a MOP, or Meeting of the Parties. The seventeenth COP, which coincided with the seventh MOP, took place in South Africa. There it was decided that the work of previous COPs and MOPs had been inadequate, and a new group was formed—the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action, usually referred to as the A.D.P. The A.D.P. subsequently split into A.D.P.-1 and A.D.P.-2, each of which held meetings of its own. The purpose of the U.N.F.C.C.C. and of the many negotiating sessions and working groups and protocols it has spun off over the years is to prevent “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” In climate circles, this is usually shortened to D.A.I. In plain English, it means global collapse.



The Framework Convention on Climate Change is overseen by an organization known as the Secretariat, which is led by a Costa Rican named Christiana Figueres. Figueres is five feet tall, with short brown hair and strikingly different-colored eyes—one blue and one hazel. In contrast to most diplomats, who cultivate an air of professional reserve, Figueres is emotive to the point of disarming—“a mini-volcano” is how one of her aides described her to me. She laughs frequently—a hearty, ha-ha-ha chortle—and weeps almost as often. “I walk around with Kleenex,” another aide told me.

Figueres, who is fifty-nine, is an avid runner—the first time I met her, she was hobbling around with blisters acquired from a half marathon—and an uninhibited dancer. Last fall, when her office was preparing for the twentieth COP, which was held in Lima, she and some of her assistants secretly practiced a routine set to Beyoncé’s “Move Your Body.” At a meeting of the Secretariat staff, which numbers more than five hundred, they ripped off their jackets and started to jump, jump, jump.

Figueres works out of a spacious office in Bonn, in a building that used to belong to the German parliament. On the wall by her desk there’s a framed motto that reads, “Impossible is not a fact, it is an attitude.” On another wall there’s a poster showing the Statue of Liberty waist-high in water, and on a third a black-and-white photograph of Figueres’s father, José, who led the Costa Rican revolution of 1948. He served as President of the country three times, pushed through sweeping political and social reforms, and abolished Costa Rica’s army as a stay against dictatorship. Figueres grew up partly in the President’s House and partly on her father’s farm, which he called *La Lucha sin Fin*—“the struggle without end.”

“I’m very comfortable with the word ‘revolution,’” Figueres told me. “In my experience, revolutions have been very positive.”

Of all the jobs in the world, Figueres’s may possess the very highest ratio of responsibility (preventing global collapse) to authority (practically none). The role entails convincing a hundred and ninety-five countries—many of which rely on selling fossil fuels for their national income and almost all of which depend on burning them for the bulk of their energy—that giving up such fuels is a good idea. When Figueres took over the Secretariat, in 2010, there were lots of people who thought the job so thankless that it ought to be abolished. This was in the aftermath of the fifteenth COP, held in Copenhagen, which had been expected to yield a historic agreement but ended in anger and recrimination.

Figueres and her team have spent the years since Copenhagen trying to learn from its mistakes. How well they have done so will become apparent three months from now, when world leaders meet for this year’s COP—the twenty-first—in Paris. Like Copenhagen, Paris is being billed as a historic event—“our last hope,” in the words of Fatih Birol, the incoming director of the International Energy Agency—and, again, expectations are running high. “We are duty-bound to succeed,” France’s President, François Hollande, has declared.

The danger of high expectations, of course, is that they can be all the more devastatingly dashed. Figueres, who is well aware of this, is doing her best to raise them further, on the theory that the best way to make something happen is to convince people that it is going to happen. “I have not met a single human being who’s motivated by bad news,” she told me. “Not a single human being.”

To understand how the fate of the planet came to be entrusted to a corps of mostly anonymous, mid-level diplomats, you have to go back to the nineteen-eighties, when the world confronted its first atmospheric crisis. That crisis, the so-called ozone hole, was the product of chemicals known as chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs. When they were invented, in the nineteen-twenties, CFCs were hailed as miracle compounds—safe alternatives to the toxic gases used as early refrigerants. Lots of additional uses were found for CFCs before it was discovered that the chemicals had the nasty effect of breaking down stratospheric ozone, which protects the earth from ultraviolet radiation. (F. Sherwood Rowland, a chemist who shared a Nobel Prize for this discovery, once reportedly came home from his lab and told his wife, “The work is going well, but it looks like it might be the end of the world.”) A global treaty—the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer—was signed in 1985 and sent to the U.S. Senate by President Ronald Reagan, who called for its “expeditious ratification.” This broadly worded “framework” was soon followed by the Montreal Protocol, which called for drastic cuts in CFC usage.

The Montreal Protocol, which has been revised a half-dozen times, mainly in response to new scientific data, averted a dystopian future filled with skin cancer and cataracts. (If you’re sitting in the sun right now, in a roundabout way you can thank the Montreal Protocol.) Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the U.N., has labelled it “perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date.”

When scientists first sounded the alarm about carbon emissions, it seemed logical to try to follow the Montreal template. In 1988, the U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring climate change to be a “common concern of mankind.” The following year, talks began on what was to become the Framework Convention.

The ozone treaty had divided the world into two blocs: high CFC users, like the United States, and low users, like Bangladesh. High users, who were largely responsible for the problem, were expected to act first, low users later. The same high-low distinction held for climate change; some countries had contributed a great deal to the problem, others very little. But almost immediately the blocs fractured into sub-blocs. Oil-producing states, like Saudi Arabia, split with low-lying, easily inundated nations, like Maldives. Rapidly industrializing countries, like India, saw their interests as very different from those of what are officially known as Least Developed Countries, like Ethiopia. The European Union wanted a treaty with strict targets and timetables for reducing carbon emissions. The United States—at that point the world’s largest emitter—refused even to consider such targets. On the eve of what was supposed to be the final negotiating session on the Framework Convention, the working draft of the document, according to one participant, resembled a “compilation of contradictory positions more than a recognizable legal instrument.”

The convention was rescued, at a price. The final version of the treaty, presented in Rio in 1992, called for the “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.” But it left virtually all decisions about how this was to be accomplished to future negotiations. Also left unresolved was how those decisions were to be reached: the convention provided no rules for voting, though it noted that such rules ought to be adopted.

This constitutive vagueness has troubled climate negotiations ever since. The parties to the convention have never managed to agree on rules for voting, meaning that every decision must—in theory, at least—be arrived at by consensus. And while a few countries have cut their CO<sub>2</sub> output since the convention was signed, globally emissions have soared, from about six billion metric tons of carbon a year in the early nineteen-nineties, to almost ten billion metric tons today.

**F**igueres lives about five miles from downtown Bonn, on the opposite side of the Rhine, in the town of Königswinter. She owns a Prius but usually takes the tram to work. One evening this spring, I rode the tram home with her. She had spent the previous night in Munich and was dragging a rolling suitcase behind her. On the walk from the tram stop to her apartment, she dropped by a market to buy food for dinner. She had no shopping bag, so she decided to carry the groceries home in her suitcase.

“I’m not Alice in Wonderland,” she told me, once we got upstairs. “You and I are sitting here, in this gorgeous apartment, enjoying this fantastic privilege, because of fossil fuels.” Figueres, who is separated from her husband, has two grown daughters, one of whom works in New York, the other in Panama. Her apartment is decorated with vividly colored paintings by Central American artists, and it looks directly onto the Rhine, which, on this particular evening, was untrafficked except for an occasional coal barge.

At the time of my visit, Figueres was preparing for a trip to Saudi Arabia. Over drinks on her balcony, she described what it had been like working with the Saudis at climate negotiations when she herself was a delegate, representing Costa Rica. “They would throw a wrench in here and get out of that room in which the issue was A, then appear over in this other room, in which it was a completely unrelated issue, throw a wrench in there, and disappear,” she recalled. “I would stand there with my mouth open. I would go, These guys are brilliant.

“The Saudis are sitting on a vast reserve of very cheap oil,” she continued. “Can you blame them for trying to protect that resource and that income for as long as they can? I don’t blame them. It’s very understandable. Let’s do a thought experiment. I come from a country that has only hydro and wind as power resources. If I had been born in a country with fossil-fuel reserves, would I have a different opinion about what’s good for the world? Maybe. Very likely, in fact.

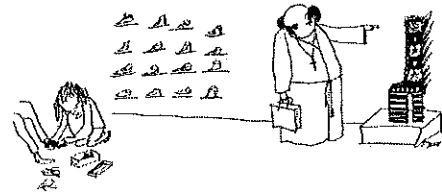
“I don’t want to put people into a black box and say, ‘You’re the culprits,’ and point a blaming finger. It just helps absolutely nothing. Call it my anthropological training. Call it whatever. But I always want to understand: what is behind all of this?”

Growing up in Costa Rica, Figueres was sent to the Humboldt School, in San José, where she learned to speak fluent German. For college, she came to the United States—to Swarthmore—where she studied anthropology. Then she spent a year working with the Bribri, an indigenous people who live in Costa Rica’s Talamanca Mountains. The village had no electricity or running water.

*“Do you have this in a flat brown sandal?”*

“I have no problem sitting on the floor, sipping hot water from a dirty cup,” she told me. “I also have no problem sitting next to Prince Charles.” Figueres had brought along a camera to document the Bribri’s

lives. She discovered that they loved to see photographs of themselves, and so every few months she would trek out of the village, by foot and by donkey, to get the pictures developed. Once, she also brought back a postcard showing New York City at night: “I thought, Let’s see how they interpret this. So I just showed them the photograph, and I said, ‘What is this?’



“‘Ah,’ they said. ‘All the little stars of heaven in rows!’ What a beautiful interpretation. They had no concept of what a lit city was. The only light they had seen at night was the stars. And then, all of a sudden, all these little stars were in rows! Now, funnily enough, I think about that response almost daily. Because my feeling is that all the little stars are aligning themselves in a different sense.”

It is Figueres’s contention that all the nations of the world are now working in good faith to try to reach a climate agreement, and that includes Saudi Arabia. She cited her invitation from the country as a sign of its new, more “constructive” approach. On her trip, she wanted to be careful to adhere to the nation’s strict dress code, so she had had her secretary call to ask what was expected of her. “I know that in Riyadh I need to wear a burka,” she told me. “Elsewhere, if they want me to wear an abaya I’ll wear an abaya.”

She also wanted to be mindful of the Saudis’ linguistic requirements. “They don’t like the term ‘low carbon,’” she explained. “They don’t like the term ‘decarbonization,’ because for them that points the finger directly at them. They would rather use the term ‘low emissions.’” This spreads the blame for global warming to other greenhouse gases, like nitrous oxide and hydrofluorocarbons. (In an unfortunate irony, hydrofluorocarbons, which, molecule for molecule, trap far more heat than CO<sub>2</sub>, were specifically engineered to replace ozone-depleting CFCs.)

“Well, frankly, I sometimes do talk about ‘decarbonization,’” Figueres went on. “But certainly I won’t talk about ‘decarbonization’ when I’m in Saudi Arabia, because I understand that is very threatening to them. Why would I want to threaten them? I need them on my side. The best thing that could happen to me would be that Saudi Arabia says, ‘You know what? With all the money that we have, we’re going to invest in the best technology in concentrated solar power.’”

In the lead-up to Paris, each country has been asked to submit a plan outlining how and by how much it will reduce its carbon output—or, to use the Saudis’ preferred term, its emissions. The plans are known as “intended nationally determined contributions”—in U.N.-speak, I.N.D.C.s. The whole approach has been labelled “bottom up,” which, by implication, makes previous efforts to cut carbon—in particular, the Kyoto Protocol—“top down.”

Drafted in 1997, Kyoto represented the first and, as yet, the only time that the parties managed to fill in some of the Framework Convention’s many blanks. People who attended that COP still remember it as a kind of endurance test for the soul. Figueres, who was there with the Costa Rican delegation, described it as “an absolutely harrowing experience.”

Kyoto imposed specific targets on roughly forty countries of the global North (not all of which, of course, are actually in the North). The targets varied from country to country; the nations of the European Union, for instance, were, collectively, supposed to cut their emissions by eight per cent, while the United States was supposed to cut them by seven per cent. (This was against a baseline of 1990.) Canada was expected to reduce its emissions by six per cent. Australia’s target allowed its emissions to grow, but not beyond eight per cent.

Countries in the global South were not given targets, on the theory that it would be unfair to ask them to reduce their already relatively small output. (Saudi Arabia, part of this second group, tried to scuttle the agreement in advance, by demanding that the text be circulated six months before the final negotiating session.) It was the United States that helped rescue the protocol—Vice-President Al Gore flew to Kyoto when the talks appeared to be foundering—and it was also the U.S. that very nearly killed it. The Senate refused to ratify the treaty, and shortly after George W. Bush entered the White House, in 2001, he announced that his Administration would not abide by its terms.

“Kyoto is dead” is how Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s national-security adviser, put it. In fact, the treaty survived, but in a zombielike state. The U.S. ignored it. The Canadians blew past their target and, midway through the period covered by Kyoto, withdrew from the agreement. Only the Europeans really took their goal seriously, not only meeting it but exceeding it.

Meanwhile, as Kyoto shambled on, the horizon receded. In the mid-nineties, China was emitting nearly a billion metric tons of carbon a year. By the mid-aughts, its output was twice that amount. In 2005, China surpassed the United States as the world's largest emitter on an annual basis. (The U.S. still holds first place in terms of cumulative emissions.) Nowadays, China's per-capita emissions are as high as Western Europe's (though not nearly as high as those in the U.S.). The more than a thousand new coal-fired power plants that went up from Guangdong to Xinjiang made Dutch wind turbines and German solar farms seem increasingly irrelevant; all of Europe's cuts were effectively cancelled out by a few months' worth of emissions growth in China. Scientists warned that the world was on track for an average global-temperature rise of four degrees Celsius (more than seven degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of this century. Such a temperature increase, they predicted, would transform the globe into a patchwork of drowned cities, desertifying croplands, and collapsing ecosystems. As a report from the World Bank noted, it's not clear "that adaptation to a 4°C world is possible."

It was to get off this path that negotiators met in Copenhagen in 2009. The new plan was supposed to establish stricter targets and extend them to more countries, including China. Instead, what emerged from the session was yet another prolegomenon to future negotiations, brokered at the very last minute—and over the objections of many other world leaders—by President Barack Obama. Known as the Copenhagen Accord, the document—a sort of climate wish list—identified a temperature rise of two degrees Celsius as the danger point for the planet. It also promised funding to help poor countries affected by warming. This funding is supposed to amount to a hundred billion dollars a year.

**F**igueres spends much of her time travelling around the globe, meeting with anyone she thinks might advance the cause. A few weeks after she visited Saudi Arabia, she went to London, where she spoke to, among others, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, and Al Gore. "In my opinion, Christiana has done a terrific job under excruciatingly difficult circumstances," Gore told me. From London, she flew to New York for three more days of back-to-back meetings.

One morning began with a breakfast at Citigroup's headquarters, on Park Avenue. Seated around the table were the New York State comptroller, the chief investment officer of Connecticut's pension funds, and representatives of several major investment firms. Figueres began by assuring the group that the negotiations leading to Paris were "still on track." Then she turned her attention to money.

"Where capital goes over the next fifteen years is going to decide whether we're actually able to address climate change and what kind of a century we are going to have," she said. She urged all those present to take this into account when making their own investment decisions, and to do so publicly: "What we truly need is to create a 'surround sound'

where, no matter what sector you turn to, there is a signal saying, 'Folks, we are moving toward a low-carbon economy. It is irreversible; it is unstoppable. So get on the bandwagon.'

The debate over what to do—or not to do—about global warming has always been, at its core, an economic one. Since the start of the industrial revolution, growth has been accompanied—indeed, made possible—by rising emissions. Hence the reluctance of most nations to commit to cutting carbon. But what if growth and emissions could be uncoupled?

In some parts of Europe, what has been called “conscious uncoupling” is already well along. Sweden, one of the few countries that tax carbon, has reduced its emissions by about twenty-three per cent in the past twenty-five years. During that same period, its economy has grown by more than fifty-five per cent. Last year, perhaps for the first time since the invention of the steam engine, global emissions remained flat even as the global economy grew, by about three per cent.

Figueres maintains that global uncoupling is not only possible but obligatory. “We frankly don’t have an option,” she told me. “Because there are two things that are absolutely key to being able to feed, house, and educate the two billion more family members who will be joining us. You have to continue to grow. And, particularly, developing countries need to continue to grow. But the other sine-qua-non condition is that you can’t continue to grow greenhouse gases, because that kills the possibility of growth. So, since you have those two constant constraints—you have to grow G.D.P., but you cannot grow G.H.G.s—what option do you have?”

The day Figueres met with investors at Citigroup, China submitted its emissions plan, or I.N.D.C. The plan elaborated on the country’s pledge to “peak” its emissions by 2030. That pledge, first made public in November, was part of a deal announced jointly with the United States. At the time, it was hailed as a breakthrough, as China had previously resisted making any commitment to capping its emissions, ever. The *Washington Post* labelled the announcement a “landmark”; *Time* called it “historic.”

It was “huge, absolutely huge,” Figueres told me. In its I.N.D.C., China said that it would make its “best efforts” to cap its emissions earlier than 2030. It also pledged to increase its share of energy produced from “non-fossil fuels” to twenty per cent. (As one commentator pointed out, to fulfill the latter promise China will have to add enough solar, wind, or nuclear generating capacity to power the U.S.’s entire electrical grid.)

Iceland, Serbia, and South Korea also submitted their plans that day. In its submission, South Korea, the world’s eleventh-largest emitter, committed to only trivial reductions, saying it could not go further because its economy is so heavily based on manufacturing. Analysts criticized the South Korean plan as essentially meaningless. Nevertheless,



Figueres included the country in her Twitter feed. “Thx Republic of Korea,” she tweeted after leaving Citigroup. She was headed over to the U.N. to meet with Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

**W**hen climate scientists talk about carbon, they usually do so in terms of parts per million. During the last ice age, when much of North America was covered in glaciers a mile thick, carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere were around a hundred and eighty parts per million. For the ten thousand years leading up to the industrial revolution, they hovered around two hundred and eighty parts per million. By 1992, when the Framework Convention was drafted, they had reached three hundred and fifty parts per million. As MOP followed COP, carbon-dioxide levels kept rising. This spring, they topped four hundred parts per million.

Owing to the CO<sub>2</sub> that’s been pumped into the air so far, average global temperatures have risen by about 0.85 degrees Celsius (1.5 degrees Fahrenheit). This relatively small increase has produced some very large effects: almost half of the permanent Arctic ice cap has melted away, millions of acres’ worth of trees in the American West have died from warming-related pest infestations, and some of West Antarctica’s major glaciers, containing tens of thousands of cubic miles of ice, have started to disintegrate. But the system has yet to reach a new equilibrium, so even if CO<sub>2</sub> levels were to stop rising tomorrow the world would continue to warm, by about .5 degrees Celsius (.9 degrees Fahrenheit).

To hold warming to less than two degrees Celsius, the best estimates available suggest that total emissions will have to be kept under a trillion tons of carbon. The world has already consumed around two-thirds of this budget. If current trends continue, the last third will be used up within the next few decades. What’s fundamentally at issue in Paris—although the matter is never stated this baldly, because, if it were, the conference might as well be called off—is who should be allowed to emit the tons that remain.

One approach would be to assign these tons on the basis of aggregate emissions. Under this approach, very large emitters, like the United States, might not get any of the dwindling slice, on the ground that they’ve already gobbled up so much. Another way to allocate emissions would be to grant everyone on the planet an equal share of what’s left; in that case, the U.S. would still have to radically reduce its emissions, but not all the way down to zero. A third approach would be to focus on efficiency. It’s expensive to shutter power plants and factories that have already been built. But, as the cost of renewable energy declines, it may be cheaper to, say, put up solar panels than to construct a new coal plant. If growth can truly be decoupled from emissions, then poor countries shouldn’t need to burn through lots of carbon in order to become wealthy.

The I.N.D.C.s obviate the need to agree on a single approach, or even to disagree. Each country brings its own proposal to the table, as if to a planet-wide potluck.

The U.S.'s plan is a peculiarly American confection. It consists of steps that the Obama Administration can take without the support of Congress, whose Republican leadership regards global warming as some kind of liberal plot. (The House Speaker, John Boehner, once called the idea that carbon-dioxide emissions are harmful "almost comical.") New rules for cars and light trucks, issued by the Department of Transportation, are supposed to raise the fuel efficiency of the average vehicle to 54.5 miles per gallon over the next decade, and new rules on power-plant emissions, recently finalized by the Environmental Protection Agency, are expected to force the closure of dozens of the country's least efficient coal-fired plants.

According to the Administration's calculations, these new rules, coupled with stricter energy-efficiency standards for equipment and appliances, will lower U.S. emissions by at least twenty-six per cent by 2025. (This is against a baseline of 2005.) President Obama has said that this is an "ambitious goal, but it's an achievable goal." Still, it will leave the world on track to burn through its two-degree budget within a matter of decades.

**W**hile Figueres was in New York, she attended a daylong meeting on climate change that had been called by the President of the U.N. General Assembly, Sam Kutesa, of Uganda. To such events, Figueres usually wears a Hillary Clintonesque outfit consisting of black slacks, black pumps, and a short, colorful jacket. (On this particular day, the jacket was teal.) As she made her way into the General Assembly building, she ran into China's lead negotiator on climate issues, Xie Zhenhua. She joked to Xie that she was sure he had all the solutions in his pocket.

"Oh, no, no, no," Xie answered, laughing nervously, once the joke had been conveyed to him by his translator.

"I believe that, under your leadership, success is a must," he told Figueres.

"Under everyone's leadership," she responded.

The meeting began with speeches by various dignitaries, including Anote Tong, the President of Kiribati. A collection of islands sprinkled across the central Pacific, Kiribati is, for the most part, only a few feet above sea level, and the nation has already bought land in Fiji as an insurance policy against rising sea levels.

"For far too long, we have spoken of climate change as the most significant challenge," Tong said. "But what have we really achieved? What have we done about it?"

Before Figueres took her turn at the lectern, she carefully went through a printout of her remarks, crossing out the word "carbon" and replacing it with "emissions." Again, she began by assuring the crowd—a mixture of climate negotiators, foreign ministers, and the occasional President—that a deal would be struck in Paris.

“In this moment, a climate-change agreement is emerging,” she said. Then she switched registers: “There is much political will already being displayed. But time is running out. And we must now turn that political will into clear leadership.” She went on, “Ministers, this is your moment. Ministers here today, you and your peers, this is your moment.”

The “bottom up” approach has reduced the chances of an impasse, but it has not eliminated them. In the language of diplomacy, anything in brackets has yet to be agreed upon. The official negotiating text for the Paris COP is currently eighty-five pages long, and virtually everything in it remains in brackets, including the first word, “Preamble.” Ten days of negotiations that were held in Bonn in June succeeded in paring the text down by just four pages; at this rate, to arrive at a treaty of, say, twenty pages would take months of non-stop talks. In his speech to the U.N. gathering, the Secretary-General complained, “The key political issues are still on the table.”

One of these issues is money. The hundred billion dollars a year that was promised in Copenhagen to poor countries is supposed to go partly toward helping them adapt to warming and partly toward financing climate-friendly energy systems. But almost everything about the financing remains unresolved, including where the cash will come from and what sorts of projects it will go toward. So far, wealthy nations have committed only about ten billion dollars to what’s been dubbed the Green Climate Fund; this includes three billion dollars that the Obama Administration has pledged but, because of congressional opposition, may not be able to make good on.

“There has to be a clear delivery of financial resources, because countries like us, we have very ambitious plans,” Amjad Abdulla, the chief negotiator for a group of low-lying nations, the Alliance of Small Island States, told me by phone from Maldives. “If we have to go back to communities and say, ‘We couldn’t get the money,’ that’s where they get furious.”

“From a developing country’s perspective, finance is going to be a deal-maker or a deal-breaker,” Tosi Mpanu-Mpanu, a member of the negotiating team from the Democratic Republic of Congo, told me. “It is going to be the ultimate test of good faith.”

Another issue is what’s become known as “the gap.” To hold warming to less than two degrees Celsius, global emissions would have to peak more or less immediately, then drop nearly to zero by the second half of the century. Alternatively, they could be allowed to grow for a decade or so longer, at which point they’d have to drop even more precipitately, along the sort of trajectory a person would follow falling off a cliff. In either case, it’s likely that what are known as “negative emissions” would be needed. This means sucking CO<sub>2</sub> out of the air and storing it underground—something no one, at this point, knows how to do. The practical obstacles to realizing any of these scenarios has prompted some experts to observe that, for all intents and purposes, the two-degree limit has already been breached.

“The goal is effectively unachievable” is how David Victor, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and Charles Kennel, a professor at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, put it recently in the journal *Nature*.

Even those who, like Figueres, argue that the goal is still achievable acknowledge that the I.N.D.C.s aren't nearly enough to achieve it. “I've already warned people in the press,” she told the gathering at Citigroup. “If anyone comes to Paris and has a eureka moment —‘Oh, my God, the I.N.D.C.s do not take us to two degrees!’—I will chop the head off whoever publishes that. Because I've been saying this for a year and a half.”

To deal with “the gap,” many countries, as well as many of the groups that are unofficial participants in the negotiations, like Oxfam and the World Wildlife Fund, are pushing for what's become known as a “progression clause.” This would commit countries to revising their I.N.D.C.s every five years, to make them more stringent. Among the countries that are opposing such a clause is Saudi Arabia.

“Players like the Saudis, like the Chinese right now, to be honest with you, are trying to water it down so you don't have a cycle of improvement,” Jennifer Morgan, the global director of the climate program at the World Resources Institute, a research group, told me from her office in Berlin. “And that, I think, is the fight that's going to be the next three months. Do we get those kernels of integrity in the international agreement or not?”

**O**n Figueres's last day in New York, I arranged to meet her at her hotel, not far from the U.N. It was a purely functional place, with no lobby or bar, so we went up to an empty lounge on the top floor, where there was a microwave and a coffee machine. Figueres made herself a cup of black tea with a tea bag she'd brought from home. I'd brought along a list of questions on a piece of paper. A few minutes into our conversation, she took the paper from me and sketched out her vision of the future:

“I love this,” she said. The straight line was supposed to represent economic growth, past and future, the curved line the rise and fall of greenhouse-gas emissions.



“That's where we are,” she said, drawing a dot right at the point where the two lines were about to diverge. She gestured toward an office tower across the street: “I think you and I will be alive when that building, all of those windows, will be covered with very, very thin-film solar cells, so that the building can produce all the energy it needs and maybe more.”

I asked what would happen if the emissions line did not, in fact, start to head down soon. Tears welled up in her eyes and, for a moment, she couldn't speak.

"Ask all the islands," she said finally. "Ask Bangladesh. We just can't let that happen. Do we have the right to deprive people of their homes just because I want to own three S.U.V.s? It just doesn't make any sense. And it's not how we think of ourselves. We don't think of ourselves as being egotistical, immoral individuals. And we're not. Fundamentally, we all have a morality bedrock. Every single human being has that."

Then she brightened: "You know, I think that this whole climate thing is a very interesting learning ground for humanity. I'm an anthropologist, so I look at the history of mankind. And where we are now is that we see that nations are interlinked, inextricably, and that what one does has an impact on the others. And I think this agreement in Paris is going to be the first time that nations come together in that realization. It's not going to be the last, because as we proceed into the twenty-first century there are going to be more and more challenges that need that planetary awareness. But this is the first, and it's actually very exciting. So I look at all of this and I go, This is so cool—to be alive right now!" ♦



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