



Harvard Kennedy School Energy Policy Seminar Series, Spring 2016

The Paris Agreement: Climate Change Policy in the Post-2020 World

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“Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good,” Professor Robert Stavins, Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government and Director of the Harvard Project on Climate Agreements, said in the Energy Policy seminar on Monday, setting the stage for his thoughts about the recent Paris climate talks.

The talks started out on a solid footing, Stavins observed, with significant “impetus to take action” provided by recent joint US-China announcements of carbon reduction plans—plans which, taken together, “cover nearly 40% of global carbon emissions,” much more than the 14% covered by the Kyoto Protocol’s current commitment period.

Key accomplishments in Paris, Stavins noted, included greatly broadening the group of countries included, reaching countries responsible for 97% of global emissions, establishing transparency requirements, and allowing for linkages between national policies.

The talks themselves, therefore, were clearly a success, Stavins concluded, resulting in a “landmark climate accord” that “provides a broad foundation for meaningful future progress.”

However, he continued, the success of the Agreement itself in bringing about adequate actions to reduce carbon emissions “may not be known for decades.”

Successful carbon reductions will depend on successful policy actions by the individual parties to the agreement (187 countries), the speaker explained. It is too soon to tell what will happen overall—in the United States, notably, meeting carbon emissions reductions goals is uncertain, particularly with the Supreme Court’s recent stay of implementation of the Clean Power Plan, one of the foundational carbon reduction policies here. On the other hand, the unexpected extension of wind and solar tax credits point, in part, towards a new route to carbon emissions reductions in the U.S.

One of the major determinants of whether the efforts of individual nations will collectively add up to a set of adequate and affordable carbon emissions reductions may well be whether “linkages” can be established between heterogeneous approaches to emissions reductions adopted by different nations. That is, will each country really be on its own, focused only on internal carbon reductions, or will there be opportunities in the system to trade or otherwise link carbon reduction goals so that the cheapest emissions opportunities can be fully pursued? Stavins explained the potential challenge here—it would be simple enough to link multiple cap and trade systems, or carbon pricing systems, but many countries may rely on performance standards or technology standards to reduce emissions—it will be more difficult, and in some cases infeasible, to link such systems, Stavins suggested. The means for creating linkages will be one of the focuses of the Harvard Project on Climate Agreements over the next few years.

Other issues of continuing focus will include considering what institutions will provide the most helpful forum for continuing the development of international climate cooperation—the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) is currently the default forum, but other possibilities include the Major Economies Forum and the G20.

Professor Stavins spoke as part of the Kennedy School’s Energy Policy Seminar Series, which is jointly sponsored by the Energy Technology Innovation Policy research group of the Belfer Center and by the Consortium for Energy Policy Research of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center on Business and Government.

