

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

COP23: not great, but good enough

By Steffen Bauer,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 23 November 2017

COP23: not great, but good enough

Bonn, 21 November 2017. The 23rd Conference of the Parties (COP 23) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) convened in the UN city of Bonn from 6 to 18 November under the Presidency of Fiji. To be a success, it needed to fulfil three requirements. First, it had to demonstrate that the future of the 2015 Paris Agreement is not on the line after the US pull-out. Second, it was expected to advance the integration of climate-policy objectives with the multilateral development agenda. Third, it was required to create a basis for the adoption of common rules and guidelines on the actual implementation of the Paris Agreement.

By and large, it met these requirements. Its outcomes warrant an organised run-up towards COP24 in the Polish city of Katowice, where binding decisions on the implementation of the Paris Agreement have to be adopted. COP23 thus delivered significant and adequate progress. This was by no means a foregone conclusion. Yet, the urgent need for action in view of progressive global warming, the lack of leadership from the European Union, erstwhile pioneer of international climate policy, and the cumbersome nature of the Bonn round of negotiations hardly give cause for exuberance.

Many civil-society organisations and climate advocates had hoped for more, especially given that COP23 was the first under the Presidency of a small island state that is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of climate change. Hence, there were high expectations with regard to an accelerated global fossil fuel phase-out and progress with regard to climate finance, adaptation to climate change, and addressing climate-related loss and damage. The half-hearted intervention offered by German chancellor Angela Merkel during COP23's high-level event, clearly due to the stalemate in building a new governing coalition in Berlin, further dampened hopes. This notwithstanding, negotiators simply got on with their job, wrangling over technical details and the small print of intergovernmental climate policy in numerous contact groups and committee sessions in COP23's secluded "Bonn Zone."

Some of the progress achieved can arguably be attributed to the Fijian Presidency. Take, for example, the decision for the Adaptation Fund, originally created under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, to remain in place under the Paris Agreement. As this was subject to negotiating many technical details, it would have been no surprise had this request by developing countries remained unresolved by COP23.

Also, the issue of loss and damage should have been

merely addressed in Bonn in the report by the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM), which was established in 2013. The COP agenda does not foresee a comprehensive debate of loss and damage before the WIM review, due in 2019. However, given the recent spate of catastrophic storms and flooding, the groups of least developed countries and small island developing states pressed for loss and damage to become a regular agenda item of the COP's biannual subsidiary body meetings. While this was effectively blocked by industrialised countries, which fear the emergence of an institutionalised forum for developing countries to raise compensation claims, COP23 agreed to call for an international expert dialogue that will address climate change-related losses and damage at the next intersessional meeting in May 2018. Its outcome in turn is set to inform the WIM evaluation in 2019. Moreover, preambular text of the corresponding decision explicitly refers to concerns about "the increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters", which had originally met with explicit opposition from Australia and the US. While this may appear somewhat trivial, achieving such progress in the procedural miniature of multilateral climate policy should not be underestimated. It is safe to assume that this will be referenced from now on in future rounds of negotiations. And this would probably not have been achieved without the symbolic clout of Fiji's Presidency.

Last but not least, the establishment of the Talanoa Dialogue leaves COP23 with a Fijian trademark. The Talanoa format is meant to ensure that parties will engage in a continuous and constructive facilitative dialogue that stretches beyond the business as usual routine of intergovernmental climate governance. By proactively engaging its Polish successor, the Fijian Presidency seeks to ensure that the run-up to COP24 is efficiently structured and to hold accountable coal producer Poland, not known as a pioneer of climate action, even before it takes over the COP Presidency from Fiji. The Talanoa Dialogue is thus widely considered the Fijian Presidency's main achievement. It is hoped that it will help to accelerate progress in addressing unfinished negotiating business and to actively shape future activities towards more ambitious and effective climate policy.

Either way, the real success of COP23 in Bonn and the Fiji Presidency will only become apparent once the outcome of COP24 is on the table. Crucially, this will have to include a meaningful rulebook to guide effective implementation of the Paris Agreement.