

## Climate Change and the G20: Shaping a New Global Narrative

Eleni Ravanis

*Department of Geography, University of Sheffield*

*International Media Centre – G20 Hangzhou Summit.* At this year's Group of Twenty (G20) Leaders' Summit in Hangzhou, the host country, China, set an ambitious tone for the summit by introducing climate change [early on](#) as an issue to be discussed. This was then underpinned by China and the USA's [ratification](#) of the Paris agreement a day before the summit. Preceding this, President Xi, in his opening remarks for the [B20 summit](#) emphasised that the G20 is in a transition period, 'evolving from a crisis management body to a group focused on long-term economic and global governance'. The issue of climate change is one that necessitates long-term consideration and therefore presents an opportunity for the G20 to lead this transition and chart out a new global narrative surrounding this issue.

The Paris Agreement was created in December 2015 and signed by 195 countries acting as representatives to the 21st meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ([UNFCCC](#)). The agreement was [hailed](#) by some as a milestone for climate change policy; it pledges to keep the rise in global temperatures to 'well below' 2 degrees Celsius, aiming for a rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Although there have been [criticisms](#) of the Paris agreement, many have praised its departure from the approach of its predecessor, the [Kyoto Protocol](#), which separated developed and developing countries into 'Annex I' and 'non-Annex I' countries respectively. Instead, the Paris agreement [recognises](#) the collective responsibility of both developed and developing countries in combatting climate change. At this year's

G20 summit, the invitation of countries such as Chad, Senegal, Laos, Kazakhstan and Thailand by the host country China was extremely pertinent given the considerable [focus](#) on climate change at this summit, and seemed to show a willingness to give a larger platform to developing nations. It is interesting to note that Xi Jinping referred to China as ‘the largest developing country in the world’ in his closing G20 press conference. This, together with the altered approach of the Paris Agreement, could indicate that we are entering into a new era of ‘[post green-colonialism](#)’, where developing countries play just as large a role in setting a new global environmental trajectory as developed ones.

To successfully implement the Paris agreement, the world will require a transition to a low-carbon economy. International economic institutions and groupings such as the G20 will play a pivotal role in the [de-carbonisation](#) of economies, particularly in the financing of infrastructure that will allow such a transition. The G20 has made some efforts towards climate change mitigation in the past, with a pledge to phase-out

‘inefficient fossil fuel subsidies’ in 2009, as well as a pledge to provide an annual US\$100 billion to developing countries through the Green Climate Fund to assist less economically developed countries already feeling the effects of climate change. In 2014, the G20 was criticised for leaving climate change off the agenda, but the issue was given a more [prominent](#) place on the agenda at last year’s G20 Leaders’ Summit in Antalya. However, the issue was somewhat sidelined by the threat of terrorism and the eventual outcome was deemed a [weak](#) and disappointing statement. This year, China paved the way for a G20 summit focused on climate change through its establishment of the [Green Finance](#) Study Group, a group co-chaired by China and the UK and supported by the UNEP (UN Environment Programme), in December 2015. In early August after the second Sherpa meeting of the G20, China issued a [Presidency statement](#) on Climate Change, promoting the implementation of the Paris Agreement and affirming that the G20 is committed to ‘vigorous implementation of the Paris Agreement’. This was the first

such statement of its kind from any of the G20 Presidencies, and it set a strong precedent for the inclusion of climate change as a key item on the agenda in the then upcoming summit.

The exclusivity of the G20 lends itself to a unique role in global climate change mitigation. The 195 countries who have signed and will hopefully ratify the Paris Agreement are not all responsible for the same amount of emissions, and there have been [suggestions](#) that including so many countries in the process only slows climate negotiations down. Together, the G20 countries account for [74%](#) of global carbon emissions, and many G20 countries have far [higher](#) amounts of carbon dioxide per capita than the rest of the world; therefore, progress in curbing carbon emissions from G20 countries would have a significant impact on global carbon output. G20 countries can take the agreements reached by COP21 and work more efficiently to implement the Paris Agreement in the countries where it will have the most impact. In short, the G20 does not have to endure the laborious and time-consuming process of agreeing upon

international goals to limit temperature rise, it instead has to build upon the work done by the UNFCCC and make the economic policy reform necessary to deliver on their previous commitments. This is also important given the fact that [questions](#) have been raised as to whether the G20 is an appropriate platform for climate change mitigation efforts – the abundance of various institutions, bodies, working groups and agreements related to climate change has resulted in criticism that the global environmental outlook and corresponding effort are [fragmented](#). However, if the G20 can keep these efforts focused on macroeconomic policy decisions, it can ensure its relevance within this global framework.

The end results of the 2016 Hangzhou G20 Leaders' Summit made some progress in elevating the issue of climate change in global discourse. The summit [produced](#) a 'G20 Voluntary Action Plan on Renewable Energy', the 'G20 Energy Efficiency Leading Programme' and continued to endorse the 'G20 Voluntary Collaboration Action Plan on Energy Access'. Whether these will result in tangible climate change mitigation

remains to be seen but at the very least, they are changing the narrative of the G20 agenda, and signalling that the transition to a low-carbon economy is approaching. In time, this may result in concrete policy changes but also encourage the private sector to make environmentally sustainable and low-polluting investments, which is particularly important for G20 member countries to do given that together members account for some [85%](#) of global GDP.

In the final [communiqué](#), the G20 committed to ‘scale up green financing’ and recognise the difficulty in ‘internalising environmental externalities’. The ‘internalising of environmental externalities’ refers to the issue that the effects of unsustainable practices are not always felt by the perpetrators, and similarly, that measures taken for a sustainable future do not always result in the largest benefits for those who make the investments in the first place, as outlined in further detail in the [G20 Green Finance Synthesis Report](#). Although the G20 have recognised these difficulties, the final communiqué does not outline

initiatives to address them. In addition, what it fails to recognise, at least explicitly, is that complying with the Paris agreement will not create win-lose scenarios for countries, but win-win scenarios for everyone. This is by virtue of the fact that beyond the 2 degrees Celsius mark, climate change negatively affects [everyone](#), and economic costs will be far [higher](#) than the costs of acting now. This is something Ban Ki-moon emphasised in his [press conference](#) before the summit, and it is something [scientists](#) have long warned of and yet have been consistently ignored. We are already feeling the economic impacts of climate change; for example, according to a study by the World Bank and the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, air pollution cost the global economy [US\\$225 billion](#) in lost labour in 2013. The G20’s commitment to internalising environmental externalities could be made far stronger if member countries reached a consensus recognising that beyond the two degrees Celsius mark, all environmental externalities become internalised and, thus, climate change becomes bad for everyone.

With regards to fossil fuel subsidies, the G20 merely [‘reaffirms’](#) its commitment to phasing out ‘inefficient fossil fuel subsidies’ and provides no set time by which to do so beyond saying the ‘medium term’. Ending fossil fuel subsidies is one of the fastest ways the G20 could make progress towards a low-carbon future, as these subsidies not only perpetuate the use of environmentally polluting high-carbon sources, but [waste money](#) that could otherwise be used for green financing projects. In addition, the G20 already [agreed](#) in 2009 to phase out ‘inefficient fossil fuel subsidies’, so expanding on efforts to do so would merely be following through on a commitment they have already made. Thus, once more we are faced with another example where the G20 needs to build on its previous commitments to make tangible progress. As for the G20’s commitments to the Paris Agreement, although they state that the G20 ‘welcomes’ efforts to bring the Paris Agreement into force by the end of 2016, they do not actually pledge that G20 members will ratify the agreement and do so this year. In these respects, the

Hangzhou Summit failed to realise as much success as it had the potential to, because its planned actions are non-binding and its language is not explicit. However, the climate change issue has been given an elevated platform in global discussions, and the transition to a low-carbon economy is now at least a tangible prospect.

In summary, the Hangzhou Summit has generated two major successes regarding global efforts toward climate change mitigation. The first is the establishment of a new narrative, one that includes sustainability, green financing, renewable energy, a low-carbon future, and will send signals to the private sector that we are making the transition towards a low-carbon economy. Having said this, solid commitments towards this end have been lacking. The second success is a tipping of the global scales when it comes to climate change responsibility and leadership. From the start of its G20 presidency, China [emphasised](#) the wish to ‘break a new path for growth’. By positioning itself as a leader in fighting climate change, China has shown developing countries that they have

an equal role to play in the creation of a low-carbon future. The G20's willingness to cooperate with and assist this, as emphasised in their final communiqué, is setting a new era of post 'green-colonialism', which is absolutely necessary for long-term sustainability. Whether this narrative and approach will be continued in subsequent actions and G20 meetings remains to be seen, but if the G20 can sustain and improve on its efforts at this summit, the world will be a lot closer to combatting this particular existential threat.

*Eleni Ravanis is a Researcher in the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield.*