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Six key issues for the UN climate change conference

The Stockholm Environment Institute will be taking part in the 23rd Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change opening today in Bonn. SEI will be presenting ideas and solutions from a broad and deep portfolio of research and capacity development.

SEI's full programme is on our COP23 [digital hub](#). Regular updates from the conference will appear on the twitter feed @SEIclimate. With countries discussing the aims and implementation guidelines of the [Paris Agreement](#), SEI researchers have put their heads together to identify some of the key issues for COP23.

The 1.5°C target and equity

To reach the Paris Agreement's goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C degrees, the global mitigation effort must be fairly distributed among countries. In other words, it must be equitable: countries with higher capacity and responsibility should contribute support to countries with lower capacity.

Researchers from SEI, the Climate Equity Reference Project and EcoEquity have [quantified each country's range of 'fair shares' for mitigation compliant with a 1.5°C limit](#). They then looked at INDCs – and found that wealthier countries fell far short in their mitigation pledges, while poorer countries collectively met their fair share.

The United States, for example, pledges at most only 24% of its 'fair share' contribution. For the European Union, that number is 23%. Industrialised countries – who have a higher capacity and higher responsibility – can't reach their fair share with domestic emissions reductions. To meet their fair-share mitigation effort, they would have to cooperate to achieve mitigation opportunities in other countries.

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Negative emissions

The Paris Agreement calls for holding global average temperature increase to “well below” 2°C, and to “pursue efforts” to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C. Given the slow pace of action to date, there is increasing interest in “negative emissions” – measures that remove carbon from the atmosphere – to help make up for lost time.

The most widely discussed options are large-scale afforestation, and bioenergy in combination with carbon capture and storage (BECCS). Landscape restoration – both restoration of closed canopy forests, and “mosaic” restoration of more intensively used landscapes – could also contribute to climate goals. Other ideas, such as direct air capture or ocean fertilization, are more speculative.

Why are negative emissions controversial? An [analysis by SEI](#) has found three significant risks: (i) that negative emission options will not ultimately prove feasible; (ii) that their large-scale deployment involves unacceptable ecological and social impacts; and, (iii) that negative emissions activities prove less effective than hoped, either because they are subsequently reversed by human or natural forces, or because climate change impacts prove irreversible.

Find out more and watch video: '[Mitigation on methadone](#)', a lecture on negative emission technologies with Kevin Anderson.

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Aligning Nationally Determined Contributions with the Sustainable Development Goals

Under the Paris Agreement, 169 countries have committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that are ambitious and progress over time. But commitment is just the first step; preparing, financing and meeting NDC goals present unique challenges for every country.

The NDCs are the most complete set of national pledges ever made to take concrete action under a multilateral agreement. But the aggregate ambition of all the plans needs to rise quickly because it is still indicating a 3°C degree average temperature rise – which can mean a devastating several degrees higher for the most vulnerable areas of the world. What's more, the policies and interventions set out in NDCs need to be coordinated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Many countries need help to set and achieve goals through analysis, dialogues, capacity building and interactive tools. [The NDC Explorer](#) gives policy makers a cross-cutting, birds-eye view of NDCs. Accessible to all, this interactive tool puts NDCs in context, showing how countries are tackling high-emission sectors, adaptation and mitigation.

The NDC Explorer has now been taken a step further, with the NDC-SDG Connections Tool. This tool shows how joint implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement can be coordinated to best effect. The tool is based on a comprehensive global analysis of all NDCs, identifying ways joint implementation offers potential synergies.

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The Rulebook

The 'rulebook' will set out the rules for effective, equitable implementation of the Paris Agreement. The [role of non-state actors in designing the rulebook](#) is a hot topic (particularly the enhanced transparency framework, the global stocktake and the implementation and compliance mechanism).

Building trust and confidence in adequate climate action can be supported by [rules on transparency](#) and an [effective review mechanism](#). This COP is discussing how the enhanced transparency framework can feed into the global stocktake and into the implementation and compliance mechanism.

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Facilitative dialogue

The 2018 Facilitative Dialogue is an intergovernmental forum to focus on immediate solutions to meet the Paris Agreement's goals and encourage raising ambition in the 163 national plans for climate action (NDCs) that countries have submitted under the agreement. Over the course of next year, it will take stock of progress that has been made and the actions that are still needed to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. As the COP22 and COP23 Presidencies have succinctly put it, the Facilitative Dialogue will help to answer: "Where are we?" "Where do we want to go?" And, "How do we get there?"

The Facilitative Dialogue will be a dress rehearsal for the first Global Stocktake in 2023, setting important precedents for what is meant by key provisions in the Paris Agreement such as "adequacy and effectiveness", and "in the light of equity". It will also provide insight into how to interpret the long-term

temperature goals: what does “well below” 2°C mean, and how earnestly must we “pursue efforts” to keep warming below 1.5°C? And, even more importantly, what should these long-term targets mean in terms of our near-term actions?

[Read a Q&A](#) on this issue.

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U.S. participation

COP23 is the first climate conference to take place in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump’s announcement that the United States intends to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. Everyone will be watching to see whether this affects levels of ambition and momentum for climate action, and who will take the lead.

What does this mean for climate change? Under the Paris Agreement, no country can formally give notice they will leave until late 2019, with the withdrawal to take effect a year later. The response to the withdrawal announcement has spurred support from range of non-governmental and subnational actors, including businesses, states and cities.

There is a risk that some countries that are not strong climate advocates might dial down ambition. However, at the G20 summit in June 2017 leaders of G20 countries except the U.S. concluded that ‘[the Paris Agreement is irreversible](#)’. And the market signals are also suggesting significant momentum behind climate action ([energy from UK offshore wind is now cheaper than electricity generated by nuclear and gas](#); [world coal use is expected to grow by about 1% by 2040](#)).

The withdrawal of the U.S. creates a space for other countries to step up, for the necessary development of unusual coalitions of actors and for creative approaches to accelerate action - from divestment to litigation.

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[Read more about SEI’s engagement at COP23 on the SEI website](#)

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