Negotiations At The UN Climate Change Conference In Madrid End In Failure. Is There A Way To Turn That Failure Into Success?

Forbes.com

December 20, 2019

Daniel B. Markind

This article originally ran on Forbes.com on December 20, 2019. All rights reserved.

Daniel B. Markind is a Forbes.com energy column contributor. The views expressed in this article are not to be associated with the views of Flaster Greenberg PC.

Climate negotiations at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Madrid ended in failure last Sunday. Despite enormous publicity and the presence of celebrities like *Time Magazine* Person of the Year Greta Thunberg, the negotiators left with little concrete achievement.

Known as COP, the conference goal was to establish rules and commitments that would include concrete steps for nations to take in order to implement the 2015 Paris Climate Accord. The result was little more than a communiqué reiterating the "urgent need" to cut greenhouse gases and a promise to help poor countries facing catastrophe.

Part of the problem with the conference was the unstable foundation on which it was building. Despite the expansive rhetoric surrounding the Paris Climate Accords of 2015, the international community actually agreed then only on the goal of limiting global warming to less than two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels by the end of the 21st Century. In fact, each country was given the opportunity to shape its own program in fighting climate change. The signatories did not agree on how this should be done or by whom.

Some countries, like the United States under the Obama Administration, pledged to do much to carry out the goals in the 2015 Paris Climate Accords. Others, like China, agreed only to keep increasing their carbon emissions until 2030 and then begin decreasing. Finally, countries like Russia refused to pledge to do much at all.

All of this played out in Madrid last week. Neither of the two key issues before the Madrid delegates was resolved. The first was how to regulate carbon markets. The second was to assess liability for damage caused by rising temperatures.

The Trump Administration, having decided to take the United States out of the Paris Accords, did not lead on either issue, and it was accused by many of being actually disruptive, especially with regard to the liability issue. China, the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide by more than double, refused to update its commitment to continue increasing emissions until 2030. Without real Chinese action, any worldwide progress will be limited and that "progress" could even be negative if other countries fail to make up for

China. Meanwhile, the industrialized countries refused a demand from the less developed countries (LDC's) to, in effect, subsidize the LDC's in their transition away from carbon based fuels. At the least, the LDC's said they either will not or cannot make substantial commitments until the wealthier countries lead the fight.

As with current internal American political issues, the world situation is muddied by an excess of hyperbole and a deficit of specifics. That was expressed in the broad comment by Alden Meyer, director of strategy and policy for the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). "*This is the biggest disconnect between this process and what's going on in the real world that I've seen*," Mr. Meyer said. "*You have the science crystal on where we need to go. You have the youth and others stepping up around the world in the streets pressing for action. It's like we're in a sealed vacuum chamber in here, and no one is perceiving what is happening out there – what the science says and what people are demanding.*"

Unfortunately for the demonstrators and Mr. Meyer, what the "people" are demanding is not necessarily doable under present realities, at least not the way they often espouse. The push for all renewables by 2050 would be easier if NGOs like the UCS took the lead in developing concrete plans on how exactly to do that. The plans would need to include specifically stating where solar power installations and other green energy producers would be located, where the additional power lines that will be needed would be constructed, what elements would be needed to produce, store and transmit energy, where and how the waste from such a massive shift in power production would be disposed, etc.

Without that level of specificity, international climate negotiators are being asked to structure their nations' futures around an energy world that might not even be feasible, and if feasible might be impossibly expensive or actually less helpful to the environment than the world we have right now. It is easy for those like the demonstrators and Ms. Thunberg to dismiss economic growth. It is not so easy for world leaders to tell their populations that over half of their nations' annual budgets will need to be used to fight climate change – in effect, ignoring practically all other societal needs in favor of pursuing this one goal. People do want to protect themselves from the predicted ravages of climate change. But no one wants to see their quality of life be reversed in doing so, and especially if the sacrifices that are needed to get there are unevenly distributed.

The United Nations is the ultimate political organization. It remains incumbent on those working under its auspices to seek real change through what is politically possible, even with international commitment and goodwill pushing for the change in question. "The international community lost an important opportunity to show increased ambition on mitigation, adaptation and finance to tackle the climate crisis" stated UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Perhaps, but perhaps what the world is telling us is that now is the time for governmental officials, NGO's like the UCS, and other concerned individuals to pivot from merely applying political pressure on behalf of an existential idea to actually starting the less glamorous work of mapping out exactly what a non-carbon world in 2050 would look like.

Stating lofty goals is one thing. But achieving those goals will require a lot of elbow grease and sheer hard work. Doing that would be provide the world a far greater service than just meeting at conferences and trying to extract promises that often are unkept, or that fail to treat the problem uniformly and fairly for all who are being asked to contribute to the solution.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

Daniel Markind