Caribbean Speaks with One Voice at Paris Climate Talks

Gregory Scruggs
Caribbean Speaks with One Voice at Paris Climate Talks

by Gregory Scruggs
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2016-01-07

At the United Nations Climate Summit in Paris last month, a poster splashed across the Wider Caribbean Pavilion spoke a thousand words about the existential threat of global climate change. A woman in a madras outfit, the traditional dress of several islands in the Lesser Antilles, stood neck-deep in blue ocean water. Sunk into the sand was a sign with the phrase “1.5 to Stay Alive.”

The number is a reference to 1.5 degrees Celsius, the increase in mean global temperature above pre-industrial levels that low-lying and island countries believe is the absolute maximum they can tolerate in order to remain on the planet. During the talks, 1.5 became a powerful slogan for the world’s most vulnerable countries.

Going into the UN summit—known as the 21st Conference of Parties, or COP 21—the general consensus was to aim for a maximum of 2 degrees Celsius, a figure established by the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Over the course of the two-week negotiations, however, intense pressure from the Caribbean and other vulnerable countries, as well as environmental activists, secured a compromise. The Paris agreement commits signatories to keep global warming “well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels,” but also to “pursue efforts” to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2015, and Jan. 8, 2016). It also recognizes “loss and damage” due to climate change, an issue that was a “red line” for Caribbean negotiators.

With this baseline victory, the Caribbean emerged from COP 21 cautiously optimistic about its future in a world increasingly dictated by extreme weather events. The island and low-lying nations that make up the region are exceptionally susceptible to sea-level rise, drought, and hurricanes, all of which are exacerbated by greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, these developing economies are among the smallest contributors to the factors that influence climate change, making an event like COP 21 an ideal opportunity to press their case and make the moral argument for action.

“I can return home to the citizens of my country and the Caribbean and reassure them that the world cares about them,” said Dr. James Fletcher, Saint Lucia’s Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development and chief climate negotiator for the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). “I can tell the young people in our region who adopted ‘1.5 to Stay Alive’ as their mantra that their future looks much brighter today than it did two weeks ago.”

The Martinique appeal

The Caribbean is a patchwork of jurisdictions, from fully independent nations to fully incorporated territories of larger continental powers, with ambiguous colonial relationships in between. The Caribbean territories most integrated with their colonial power are France’s overseas departments and collectivities of Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique, Saint Barthélemy, and Saint Martin. Since 1946, these French colonies – scattered from the Lesser Antilles to the South American mainland – have been fully French soil, sending representatives to the National Assembly in Paris, voting in elections, holding EU passports, and using the Euro.
Normally, this level of integration with the metropolis makes the French-speaking Caribbean bloc one of the least engaged in the region’s international affairs, but because France was the host of COP 21, the opposite happened. On May 9, Martinique hosted the Caribbean Climate Summit with no less of a keynote speaker than French President François Hollande. The summit’s outcome was the Martinique Appeal, a first broadside from the region in the push for a global warming cap below 1.5 degrees Celsius. In order to bring that message to Paris, the summit also initiated plans for a Wider Caribbean Pavilion that would gather the entire region under one roof at COP 21.

Such a task was easier said than done, given how fragmented the region is over so many jurisdictional lines. CARICOM has both full and associate members, the latter designation used generally for islands that are not sovereign states. The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) has full and associate members as well. For those Caribbean nations who are also UN member states, the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) category and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) create yet another level of potentially overlapping memberships.

The hodgepodge of sovereignty can make it difficult for the Caribbean to speak with a unified voice in international affairs. This challenge is complicated by linguistic and cultural barriers – results of the very history that created such divergent political statuses from one island to the next. Above all, non-independent territories generally lack the authority to even have a seat at the table, since either The Hague, London, Paris, or Washington represents them under the norms of international law.

But in light of the unique threat that climate change poses for the Caribbean, COP 21 provided an opportunity for the largest-ever unified front for the Caribbean at an international event, putting nearly every Caribbean territory, whatever its status, at the same table through the Wider Caribbean Initiative, which boasts 30 adherents.

“Caribbean islands have a voice at COP 21, we can push things” as a result of the pavilion, said a Martinique Regional Council spokesperson. “For once, it was an advantage to be in France and the EU. Little by little, we are forging links.”

“We were of a single mind,” said CARICOM Secretary-General Irwin LaRocque. “We were one body with several parts working together in unison to achieve a set of goals that we had set. We left Paris with ... our objectives being addressed in the agreement.”

Half degree of difference

The chorus arguing for 1.5 degrees Celsius as the only acceptable limit to global warming went from the margins to the mainstream once COP 21 swung into full gear. Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) cluster into negotiating blocs. Since 2009, a group of 20 nations has constituted the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). Heading into Paris, they rebranded themselves as the V20 – a clever play on the rich country forum, the G20. Barbados and Saint Lucia are charter members of the CVF.

“It’s really only been in the past couple of months that the Climate Vulnerable Forum has really organized itself and become much more vocal,” said Liz Gallagher, of the environmental think tank E3G. Recent events, such as devastating storms in the Philippines, buoyed the 1.5 cause. Expressing the severity of the matter, a Barbadian delegate at COP 21 was quoted as saying, “We will not sign off on any agreement that represents a certain extinction of our people.”
Early on during COP 21, the CVF gained some key allies in South America. The delegations of Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, and Peru all joined the call for a 1.5 degrees Celsius limit. They are all members of the Asociación Independiente de América Latina y el Caribe (AILAC), a seven-country negotiating bloc that was formed during COP 18 in Doha. By joining the 1.5 degrees Celsius cause, they went above and beyond the stance of their regional counterparts.

Finally, Caribbean countries, both CVF members and otherwise, walked the walk in addition to talking the talk. Ahead of COP 21, all parties to the UNFCCC were expected to submit a climate action plan known as an Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC). Even though the Caribbean has one of the world’s lightest carbon footprints and is a minimal contributor to climate change, Caribbean countries were expected to show they have skin in the game.

St. Lucia, for example, committed to an ambitious target of 35% renewable energy by 2030, relying on its abundant solar resources. Antigua and Barbuda announced that it would climate-proof all buildings by 2030. Barbados plans to cut emissions by 44% ahead of 2030.

**Loss and damage**

As poor countries suffer the devastating effects of climate change, they have clamored for rich countries to pick up the tab. This provision in any climate agreement, known as “loss and damage,” was a major sticking point in Paris. While the developing world pushed for language that would make polluting countries liable and allow for compensation, that was a non-starter for major players like the US. As Secretary of State John Kerry told Rolling Stone, “We’re not against [loss and damage]. We’re in favor of framing it in a way that doesn’t create a legal remedy, because Congress will never buy into an agreement that has something like that ... [T]he impact of it would be to kill the deal.”

In the end, liability and compensation was a point that developing countries – including Caribbean nations, who face huge costs at the hands of climate change – were forced to concede. The Paris agreement does not have such a provision but does open the door for rich countries to subsidize risk or flood insurance in advance of climate impacts, rather than paying to clean up the mess. The final text also separates loss and damage from the issue of climate adaptation, which was considered a victory for developing countries. Historically, climate mitigation and adaptation have been the two pillars of any climate agreement, with loss and damage considered a subset of adaptation. However, loss and damage was separated as its own distinct pillar in Paris.

“The separate treatment of loss and damage in the agreement is also a most welcomed development,” Fletcher said. “While I pulled these two elements out for special mention, we view this agreement not as a combination of separate articles, but as a total package that will provide us with the legal framework for protecting our ecosystems, our islands, our people, our cultures, and our planet.”

-- End --