

Comment



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Christiana Figueres at the 21st United Nations Climate Change Conference. She led the negotiations that produced the 2015 Paris agreement.

The secret to tackling climate change

Christiana Figueres

To the world leaders mustering in Davos: set your minds to reaching net-zero emissions, and you can forge the future we need.

As political leaders, industry executives and celebrities gather this week for their yearly networking meeting in Davos, Switzerland, top of their agenda is the need to halve global carbon emissions by 2030.

Of the many barriers to achieving this goal, the greatest is mindset. I had to learn this a decade ago when I was appointed to lead the international climate-change negotiations that resulted in the 2015 Paris agreement: ultimately, 195 nations pledged to reduce emissions and alter their economies to protect our planet. They also agreed to increase

their efforts towards net-zero emissions substantially every five years. That makes 2020 a crucial year. We cannot afford for governments to let that key commitment slip.

The Paris agreement was a breakthrough after a devastating collapse in Copenhagen in 2009, when years of preparation and two weeks of excruciating around-the-clock negotiations produced only a weak, legally irrelevant accord. Copenhagen was a free-for-all of political frustration, outrage and disagreement – with the global north and global south set against each other. Last month's United Nations climate meeting in Madrid left many of us similarly bereft. That makes the lesson of how we got from Copenhagen to Paris all the more relevant.

It started with my making a big mistake in the summer of 2010, at a press conference with 40 journalists in a windowless room at the Maritim Hotel in Bonn, Germany. When asked whether a global agreement on climate change would ever be possible, I blurted out, without thinking, what most already thought: "Not in my lifetime." That's how close I came to

making failure a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I immediately realized that, before we could consider the political, technical and legal parameters of an eventual agreement, I had to dedicate myself to changing the mood: there could be no victory without optimism. I decided to set a clear intention: even if we did not know precisely how, a global deal would emerge, simply because it was necessary. It was that contagious frame of mind that led to effective decision-making, despite the enormous complexities under which we were operating. When the Paris agreement was achieved, the optimism that people felt about the future was palpable – but, in fact, optimism had been the primary input.

Since then, science has become clearer about the threats of climate change: now, even our children know that business as usual will lead to destroyed infrastructure, devastating loss of plants and animals, and millions of people struggling in regions made uninhabitable from rising temperatures and lack of fresh water.

What is much less clear is what life will look like in those places where we do what is necessary to limit warming to 1.5 °C, as stipulated by the Paris agreement. To get to what we achieved in Paris, we moved away from confrontational blaming-and-shaming to appreciating shared opportunities. Now, we must picture, say, cities full of green spaces pulling carbon dioxide from the atmosphere; widespread public transport; thriving wildernesses; rural economies rebooted for sustainable agriculture; and jobs in renewable-energy projects.

Optimism is about acknowledging difficulties – and losses – yet still designing a better future. An excellent example is the European Union's proposed European Green Deal, announced in December 2019. This explicitly reframes an urgent challenge as a unique opportunity to create a “resource-efficient and competitive economy” that will generate jobs, purify air and mobilize industry, agriculture and other sectors to deliver net-zero emissions by 2050.

My own country, Costa Rica, has already launched an economy-wide plan to ‘decarbonize’ by 2050. This ambitious plan, the first of its kind when it was announced last February, will expand forests and promote electric taxis and public buses. It is based on respect for human rights and gender equity, and clearly recognizes the opportunity for decarbonization to revitalize the economy.

Most executives already understand that they need to contribute to climate stabilization just to ensure that their businesses have a future. The number of companies



Costa Rica has launched a decarbonization plan that will expand the country's forest cover.

setting science-based targets in line with a 1.5 °C trajectory doubled between September and December last year. Similarly, the combined assets managed by the Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance – a group of investors aligning their portfolios with a 1.5 °C future – had surged from US\$2.4 trillion to \$4 trillion within two months of its launch in September 2019. Leaders in the oil and gas industries have told me privately that shareholder and public pressure, plus questions from their own children, have prompted them to shift their practices.

Despite this, I posit that most people, including many of those attending the Davos meeting, still harbour the view that it is impossible to truly transform our economy in one decade. We cannot afford such fatalism. Swift change has happened before, and without being driven by planetary necessity: the global Internet is just 30 years old.

If we can see where we are going – a future in which humanity does what is necessary to preserve the planet as we know and love it – we will take faster, surer steps to get there. That visualization is all the more important because how we are going to get to this future will feel unfamiliar. The transition of technologies and systems in music and information makes sense only because we have seen vinyl records yield to streaming services and paper superseded by mobile multimedia. We must be ready to shape the necessary transition for energy, transport and more. And we must understand that this transition will be driven collectively.

The global economy is a huge, complex system. As I learnt during my stewardship of

the Paris agreement, if you do not control the complex landscape of a challenge (and you rarely do), the most powerful thing you can do is to change how you behave in that landscape, using yourself as a catalyst for overall change.

Imagine a person who wants to run a marathon and then concentrates on the fact that they can't yet even run a mile: they begin to close the space of possibility. But, if that person adopts a different mindset, commits to a training schedule and visualizes passing the finish line, their goal is much more likely to be achieved.

To all the people gathering in Davos, and all those watching from the outside, I urge you to move firmly into a state of stubborn optimism. The Anthropocene, the proposed geological age we now live in, does not need to go down in history as the age characterized by human-induced destruction. It can be the time when we rewrite our expected future for a better one: we still hold the pen. We must conceive of success and take immediate steps towards it.

The author

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