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Harvard professor optimistic about Paris climate conference

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CHRISTOPHE ENA/AP

Activists protesting against polluters held banners at the Climate Generations Areas as part of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Le Bourget, north of Paris.

By Matt Rocheleau

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A leading expert on international climate agreements says he is optimistic that the ongoing conference in Paris will take a big step toward reducing planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

“This is a very promising moment in the history of global climate negotiations,” said Harvard professor Robert N. Stavins, who directs the university’s Project on Climate Agreements and its environmental economics program. “I think there’s a real possibility for this to be a highly successful meeting.”



MARTHA STEWART

Harvard professor Robert Stavins

Stavins on Tuesday was preparing to fly to Paris to speak at numerous events tied to the international climate change conference — the largest gathering of world leaders in history — which began Monday.

There, Stavins and other members of his research group will also meet privately with negotiating teams from numerous countries to lend their expertise.

Stavins listed five goals that he believes will likely be reached at the talks:

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Nearly 18 years after the ineffective Kyoto Protocol, hopes are high for real progress to come from the COP21 discussions.

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1) The first and most critical goal is to see a large majority of countries submit written agreements to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Stavins said he would see it as a success if enough countries make the pledge so that about 90 percent of global emissions are covered by the agreements, known as Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs.

This goal has already been surpassed.

As of Tuesday, 183 countries had signed on to such agreements, covering 97.8 percent of global emissions, according to the [World Resources Institute](#). The list includes virtually all of the key players and major greenhouse emitters, Stavins said.

“Adequate scope of participation — that’s a necessary

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condition for ultimate success,” he said.

He said the level of engagement now is a massive improvement from the Kyoto Protocol, a deal signed in 1997 that has been the primary international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions since it went into effect in 2005.

That deal did not require commitments from developing nations, like China, India, and Brazil, that in recent years have accounted for much of the growth in harmful emissions. What’s more, several key developed countries never fully signed on or backed out of the agreement, including the United States, Russia, and Japan.

In its current state, the Kyoto Protocol covers countries accounting for no more than 14 percent of global emissions, Stavins said.

2) Stavins said he also expects that countries will establish requirements for credible and transparent reporting of their efforts to live up to their agreements.

He said having more honest accounting of each nation’s progress in reducing emissions will be key to fighting climate change.

3) Another goal would be to start the establishment of a system to finance both “climate mitigation” — or efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions — and “climate adaptation” — or changes that may be needed to deal with the impacts of climate change, such as constructing infrastructure to protect people from more extreme weather or to shield coastal communities from rising seas.

Stavins said such a funding mechanism will likely be created and, he hopes, it will include private dollars in addition to public money.

4) He said another key component he expects to see is for countries to agree to revisit the terms of their INDCs periodically — every 5 to 10 years — with the goal of ratcheting up expectations.

“What will need to happen going forward is gradually increasing ambitions,” said Stavins.

5.) Stavins’s final hope is that countries put aside disagreements that have been unproductive in the past.

He cited as an example a so-called “loss and damage” proposal, which calls for wealthy countries to

vow to help poor ones recover from extreme weather events.

Such disputes have in the past overshadowed other areas where countries share common ground, and Stavins said he is least optimistic that this goal will be reached.

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Even if all of those goals are met, Stavins said, plenty of work will need to be done after the conference concludes.

As an example, he noted how the initial set of commitments that countries have made would dramatically cut projections of global temperature increases over the next century, but would still fall short of a commonly cited goal for limiting temperature growth.

“What’s being done is getting the foundation right,” said Stavins. “I see it as only a first step, a very sound first step.”

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