

Along with the [UCLA Law crew](#) of Ann, Ted, Cara, and Alex, plus six law students, I'll be attending the UN climate change negotiations in Paris next week, primarily to highlight [California's effort](#) to achieve a strong subnational agreement on greenhouse gas reductions. The "Under 2 MOU" is an impressive commitment by [diverse subnational entities](#), such as cities and states within nations, to keep warming to under two degrees Celsius by 2100. It already has [57 signatories](#), constituting the largest combined GDP in the world, and it may push international negotiators to secure a more aggressive agreement.

I'm looking forward to the trip, as I hope to learn a lot and meet people working on climate change from all around the globe. But I have to confess, I've been [a skeptic](#) of the UN process on climate change and am still unsure of what can be meaningfully accomplished there this round.

To solve climate change, the world needs to do two things: put a meaningful price on carbon and reduce the cost of clean technologies, like solar panels and batteries. (Command-and-control limits on high-polluting sources would help but won't solve the problem alone, not to mention they are politically challenging to implement.) As I look to Paris, I wonder what authority the UN and the high-level attendees there have to actually make progress on those two fronts.

In terms of setting a price on carbon, it seems politically impossible that we could achieve a UN-mandated, global carbon tax, either this round in Paris or in future rounds in the near future. That price will instead have to come from nations and subnational entities willing to impose it in their own jurisdictions, like Alberta just did, [as Jonathan noted](#). And that means votes from members of parliaments, legislatures, and congresses across the globe (or "party leaders," for the less democratically inclined nations). Members of those lower level decision-making bodies will generally not be in attendance in Paris.

But more importantly, these non-UN decision-making bodies may not be bound by what comes out of Paris. Or if they are bound, the enforcement mechanisms may be lacking (as Ted [described](#) in his recent post). Certainly here in the United States, President Obama and Secretary Kerry do not have authority to impose a national carbon tax in the United States via this agreement — they need congressional representatives to vote for it, and they won't, at least in the current congress. So any meaningful agreement in Paris will have to somehow require national action on carbon pricing with clear enforcement mechanisms, and that seems unlikely to happen.

On the clean technology front, the UN may be better suited to help develop a pot of money for rich nations to fund for clean tech research and deployment. Already we've seen [Bill Gates and other wealthy people](#) step up for a "clean innovation" fund. So maybe we'll see some progress there. But again, much of the support and market development for clean technology will come from domestic programs, like the U.S. solar tax credit, German feed-in tariff, or California's energy storage mandate. The people who make those decisions largely won't be in attendance or negotiating. And again, it's not clear that they will have to abide by any resulting agreement.

So is Paris pointless? Well, as much as I enjoy fresh croissants and great works of art, I wouldn't be going if I thought so. For starters, it certainly can't hurt if we get a strong, international political signal that countries everywhere are willing to do something on climate. Maybe that statement will embolden decision-makers in these various countries to follow through on the needed policies in their pledges. And at a minimum, it could be useful to have information-sharing among the countries and a framework for more aggressive action in future years. Not to mention that the agreement can help countries that will bear the brunt of climate change to receive aid from the wealthier countries that caused it. So all of that is reason to support what's happening in Paris.

But at the same time, we should be careful not to let the UN process give everyone a false sense of progress, or distract from the real work that will still need to be done. That work is happening now in places like California, Germany, Japan and other progressive states and nations. They need support and action to demonstrate to the world how to reduce emissions and grow the economy, while bringing the costs of the energy transition down in the process. Because ultimately those examples are what will motivate action in other places — not a voluntary international agreement.

I hope to return from Paris on the heels of unexpected progress on the global fight to limit climate change. And I'll attempt to blog while there on California's impact on the process. But I start out skeptical of how well-positioned we are to achieve real-world, long-term gains with this process. Let's hope I'm proven wrong.