

Back in 1920s Paris, an unknown writer named Ernest Hemingway hung out in the local cafes with other aspiring artists. It was an odd group, featuring communists like Pablo Picasso, fascists like [Ezra Pound](#), and [right-wingers](#) like Gertrude Stein. But they helped each other, promoting their work and ultimately producing a generation of famous artists captured in Hemingway's posthumous memoirs [A Moveable Feast](#). I now wonder if the Paris climate talks may serve a similar purpose — galvanizing a diverse network of leaders that can cumulatively promote their cause back home.

I've been attending the UN climate summit this week in part to answer the question of why this process matters. As I [blogged last week](#), it's hard not to feel skepticism about a process that has essentially yielded very little for two decades now. At the same time, the independent work of states and nations like California and Germany have completely altered the economics and technology of climate mitigation for the better — making the UN process feel even more pointless by comparison.



Global elected officials and leaders gather in Paris to listen to the COP 21 plenary.

So in that spirit, I've been asking people at the conference why they believe the international process is important. Most of them admit to me that they're not quite sure how effective it will be, given past failures and the work that remains ahead around the globe. And of course, we still don't have a final deal, and we don't know how well Obama Administration lawyers can craft an enforceable executive agreement that won't need to be ratified by the U.S. Senate.

But the people I've spoken with have made a number of important points that shouldn't be overlooked. Without Paris and all the great expectations associated with it, we wouldn't have had a number of major developments, such as:

- The [papal encyclical](#) casting climate change as a moral issue by an influential religious leader. Or at least the encyclical probably wouldn't have gotten the coverage it did with the timing that it had, plus the [corresponding bump](#) in public acceptance of climate science that it seems to have spurred.
- The California-led [Under 2 MOU](#) effort to rally subnational climate leaders, which was explicitly aimed at motivating international negotiators in Paris. At a minimum, each of those subnationals will benefit from the agreement in many untold ways, given the information-sharing and political alliance it has forged.
- The mountain of media coverage and attention on the climate issue that the Paris talks have generated, leading to greater public awareness and possibly support for climate mitigation efforts.
- The network of influential elected officials primed to return to their home jurisdictions and promote the needed climate policies, as I alluded to above. That national and subnational implementation is where all the real work will be. While we don't yet know how successful these climate leaders will be, at least they'll be returning from Paris about as well-prepared as possible to take on their domestic challenges.

All of these developments point to the importance of having a singular, global event and discussion on climate change, which Paris has so far produced.

But in attending the conference, I've also seen first-hand the value of having such a global networking event. From "climate justice" activists to clean technology purveyors to big business leaders to nonprofit advocates to elected officials from every corner of the globe, these summits offer idea-sharing and networking that carry benefits well beyond the gathering, leading to collaboration and ideas with as-yet-undefined but likely benefits.

Of course, there's still the risk that Paris fails to produce an agreement — or a good one. Or that so much hope is placed in the process that even with a seemingly good agreement we take our attention off the all-important implementation phase at the national and subnational level.

But so far it seems like this conference has little downside. The leading national and subnational players will still need to get the work done on climate back home, but Paris will provide some wind at their backs. And it may deflate the objections of some opponents, who could previously cite the lack of international action as a reason to do nothing.

So even when the conference pavilions come down, my guess is this climate feast at Paris will continue to move.