

Climate-change governance: achievements, hopes and dangers

Global leaders must put climate protection at the heart of key agendas in the wake of the dire warnings spelt out in the IPCC's latest report

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On 30 March 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its most compelling scientific evidence to date of the catastrophic consequences of global climate change. The report concludes what many in the scientific community have been affirming for years, namely that “increasing magnitudes of warming increase the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts” – impacts not only on the natural environment and marine ecosystems, but also on food security, freshwater availability, agricultural incomes and human health.

According to the report, the striking feature of observed impacts is that they are “occurring from the tropics to the poles, from small islands to large continents, and from the wealthiest countries to the poorest”. Taken together, the cumulative effects of a significantly changing climate are projected to drastically increase the rate and likelihood of violent conflict around the globe, particularly in high-density urban poverty hotspots.

Early commitments

Yet 35 years ago, the leaders of the G7, meeting in Tokyo, declared in their final communiqué the need to “expand alternative sources of energy, especially those which help to prevent further pollution, particularly increases of carbon dioxide and sulphur oxides in the atmosphere”.

By boldly acknowledging the need to halt the concentration of carbon dioxide emissions in the world's atmosphere, the leaders embarked on a process that would see the G7/8 produce close to 400 discrete commitments on issues related to energy and climate governance since its inception in 1975. The G7/8's leadership, however, has been exerted unevenly over this 40-year period, with clear surges in the

group's governance of climate issues from 1975-80, 1987-92, and again from 2005-09, and with notable dips in between.

Although the process of governing global climate change by the G7/8 has been both challenging and constraining, the group is credited with leading climate governance in ways that other international environmental institutions have largely failed to do. Since its inception in 1975, the G7/8 has put climate protection at the forefront of its policy objectives, alongside economic, health, energy and security goals, reaching consensus repeatedly among its leaders on the importance of stabilising emissions through energy efficiency, conservation, investment and technological innovation.

An important turning point

But while the G7/8 has performed well on climate issues linked to energy, its performance historically has been less impressive on issues linked to carbon sinks and marine protection. It also failed to deliver the convention on forests that it promised at its Houston Summit in 1990. Furthermore, during times of failed consensus, summit leaders have had to retreat to issues on the margins of the climate question, focusing for example on acid deposition (1985 Bonn), observation networks (1989 Paris), clean water (2003 Evian) and the ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle’ initiative (2004 Sea Island).

But the 2005 Gleneagles Summit marked an important turning point. British host

Tony Blair made climate change one of his top summit priorities, assembled the world's largest carbon emitters at the summit through the G8 Plus Five process, which brought in Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa, and persuaded the United States to accept a new climate-change regime that would move ‘beyond Kyoto’ to include all existing and emerging powers. Gleneagles thus marked the emergence of a new consensus among the G8 members on the importance and urgency of the effects of a changing climate on energy, health, security and the global economy.

From 2005-09, the G8's focus shifted from reacting defensively to climate issues to becoming more proactive in the development of governance regimes that would deal with climate issues in more innovative and inclusive ways. Recognising the failure of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Kyoto Protocol in containing the world's largest carbon emitters – led by China – the G8 embraced these actors in more inclusive, burden-sharing ways. By bridging the efforts of G8 energy ministers as well as carbon-consuming and producing countries through G8-centred bodies, the leaders put in place more comprehensive and inclusive initiatives to further institutionalise the process by which these actors would consolidate their climate mitigation efforts.

And since 2009, the G8's success has been most evident in effectively recognising the need to be more inclusive on climate governance issues and decisions.

At its most recent 2013 summit in Lough Erne, Northern Ireland, G8 leaders noted they would pursue “ambitious and transparent actions” on climate change through various international forums, including the Major Economies Forum on Energy and Climate, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization. Moreover, in joining

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the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, the G8 members formally recognised that climate change was “a contributing factor in increased economic and security risks globally”.

But words in the global climate vernacular are largely viewed as mere rhetoric without the commitment of hard cash by the largest industrialised countries to fund climate-related programmes and initiatives. To this end, the G8 leaders reiterated at Lough Erne their commitment to mobilise \$100 billion of climate finance a year by 2020 through a “wide variety of sources”.

Effecting change

What obstacles do world leaders currently confront in meeting these global challenges?

The challenges presented by global climate change are vast and their impacts have the potential to affect every species and human being on Earth, as the most recent IPCC report concludes. But one of the biggest challenges currently faced by world leaders is their ability, and indeed competence, not only to comprehend the vastly complex and largely uncertain characteristics of the climate debate, but also to act in a concerted and comprehensive fashion in the face of this mounting, yet disputed, scientific consensus.

How world leaders at future summits can best help in this regard is indeed a complex question. Over the past 40 years the G8’s governance of global climate change has been neither continuous nor complete in addressing the vast array of issues related to climate mitigation and control.

To effect change in the climate debate moving forward, world leaders must exert leadership in ways that have yielded successes in the past – through initiation, leadership, inclusion and collective support of global climate governance initiatives. But to do so, world leaders must place climate protection at the apex of their health, development, security and economic agendas. Only by continuing to recognise the complex interdependencies of climate mitigation can world leaders take the political steps needed to reverse these alarming and threatening global climate trends. ■



A man wearing a mask cycles through a smog-covered Beijing, China. The G8 members have joined the Climate and Clean Air coalition

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