The Politics of Decarbonization and the Shifting Context of Global Climate Governance

By Dr. Matthew Hoffmann[1]

Paper prepared for the Climate Change and Renewable Energy Policy in the EU and Canada Workshop, Carleton University, Ottawa. 1-2 October 2015.[2]

We are in the midst of two significant transformations in the global response to climate change. The first is a change in the nature and role of global climate governance from a centralized, top-down approach to a multilevel and bottom up dynamic. The second is an accompanying shift in focus from emissions reductions as the goal of climate policy and governance to decarbonization. These shifts have considerable implications for the global context of renewable energy and climate policy as well as opportunities for leadership in the global response to climate change. My remarks will trace the broad outlines of these transformations and highlight two key implications. First, the familiar, if vexing, global commons problem of emissions reductions is giving way to the new challenges of decentralized, multilevel politics of decarbonization. This is uncertain terrain, but opportunities abound for catalytic action on renewables to come from multiple sources. Second, we retain the need for big defining moments like Paris 2015 in an era of fragmented and multilevel climate governance, but the opportunities for different kinds of leadership have emerged and should be seized.

Emergence of alternative climate governance models[3]

The conventional approach to governing climate change through mega-multilateral treaty-making has thus far faced insurmountable political obstacles and has failed to deliver an effective global response (see e.g. Victor 2011; Depledge 2006; Dimitrov 2002). Hope for agreement on an effective treaty in Paris 2015 is surging, but must be seen in the context of significant transformation in the nature of global climate governance. First, the multilateral process itself has shifted from a top-down to bottom up approach. This change was initiated at the Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2009 when the focus of negotiations shifted from collective requirements to a model of individual national commitments and a pledge and review system.

Perhaps even more significant has been the emergence of transnational or experimental modes of climate governance (Andonova et al 2009; Bulkeley et al 2012; Abbot 2012; Hoffmann 2011) that work beyond the multilateral arena. Global networks of cities are working to alter municipal economies, transportation systems, and energy use. Corporations are forming alliances with environmental NGOs to devise large and small ways to deliver climate friendly technology and move towards a low carbon economy. States, provinces, environmental organizations, and corporations are engaged in developing carbon markets that promise low-cost means of reducing emissions. These kinds of initiatives are shaping how individuals, communities, cities, counties, provinces, regions, corporations, and nation-states respond to climate change.

Recently, there have been efforts to bring the traditional and transnational modes of governance together – the Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action (NAZCA) process launched at the UN Conference of the Parties (COP 20) in Lima,[4] the National Resources Defense Council's (NRDC) "cloud of commitments,"[5] the UN Secretary General's climate summit from 2014, and the groundswell of climate action discussions.[6] This is a recognition that the multilateral process is not sufficient on its own for developing a global response to climate change and that global climate governance is inherently a multilevel governance phenomena.

From emissions reductions to decarbonization[7]

The conception of climate change as an emissions problem dominated the global response to climate change for 25 years and the UN process has largely been an effort targeted at negotiating emissions reductions – how far to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, how to distribute reduction commitments, how to achieve reductions, and how to pay the costs of reductions. This focus on emissions is a focus on proximate causes of the problem. This may appear to be a subtle difference, that is, to focus on the emissions of greenhouse gases rather than the processes that produce them, but it is more than semantics. Defining

---

[3] This section is drawn from Hoffmann 2011.

[4] See, http://newsroom.unfccc.int/unfccc-newsroom/showcase-your-climate-action-in-support-of-paris-2015/.

[5] The cloud of commitments is a clearinghouse of actions and commitments beyond the multilateral process. See, http://www.cloudofcommitments.org/.

[6] See, http://www.climategroundswell.org/#home-section.

[7] This section is drawn from Hoffmann 2013.

a problem based on its proximate or fundamental causes makes for a very different governance context.

Indeed, the shift mentioned above to a multilevel and diverse global response has been accompanied by the emergence of a stronger focus on decarbonization and broad transformation. Alternative governance initiatives work towards multiple ends. Emissions reductions are certainly one of the goals being pursued by some initiatives, but other goals – transitioning infrastructure, promoting renewables, developing the green economy, emissions trading and carbon markets (as ends in themselves), and revolutionizing IT infrastructure – are also included in the diverse targets pursued by transnational governance initiatives. The proximate cause of climate change (i.e. emissions) is not ignored, but in looking across the myriad transnational initiatives, it is joined by a focus on the underlying causes – fossil fuel dependence of energy systems, transportation systems, and the global economy. Individual initiatives might very well focus on emissions, but because of the diversity in the population of alternative governance initiatives, a broader, if decentralized, focus is clearly observable. Transformation towards decarbonization, not just emissions reductions, is the collective goal of transnational governance.

Beyond the global commons[8]

These two shifts have major implications for the global response to climate change. One is a reorientation of the structure of the challenge that we face. Shifting focus to transformation and decarbonization, however, creates a paradox for our traditional definition of climate change as a global commons problem: there is no global system to act upon. Thus, the logic of collective action on which multilateral negotiations are based is the wrong frame; decarbonization is not a common pool resource problem because it does not involve a single set of actors in a system – states – sharing a resource. Global energy, transportation, and economic systems are locked-in to carbon (Unruh 2000) because transportation, energy, and economic systems at the municipal, sub-national, state and regional level are locked-in to carbon. Decarbonization thus begins with the realization that carbon lock-in is the result of multiple, interlocking systems that exist at multiple levels.

When we shift from a focus on emissions reductions through multilateral negotiation, to a focus on decarbonization through multilevel action, the nature of the politics and the governance challenge changes significantly. We are no longer facing the familiar, if vexing, global commons problem. Instead, we face new challenges of decentralized, multilevel governance, but also opportunities for catalytic action on renewables and other avenues to come from multiple sources. Politics geared towards addressing climate change thus shifts. It is about building coalitions and conditions that support transformation in particular places. It is about scaling transformations. It is about entrenching innovations in multiple political jurisdictions (Levin et al. 2012). Renewable energy, in this context, is not just a policy tool for meeting national obligations to reduce emissions, it is a political force that shifts the nature of coalitions and discourses in particular places, potentially altering what society conceives of as normal and building capacity for broader action towards decarbonization.

---

[8] This section is drawn from Bernstein and Hoffmann 2015.

The role of "Big, Defining Moments"

A second implication of the two shifts discussed above is that we need to recalibrate our expectations of the UN process. The world will gather in Paris at the end of 2015 for the latest round of climate negotiations and the latest "last chance to save the world." Robert Redford, Prince Charles, the Guardian newspaper, and Jeffrey Sachs, to name but a few, are all proclaiming the Paris climate negotiations to be some version of humanity's last, best chance to put in place an effective response to climate change that will avert what many see as a coming climate catastrophe. I say "again" because these kind of statements are eerily familiar for those that paid attention to the run up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate negotiations. Nicholas Stern, Gordon Brown, and diverse activists trumpeted similar warnings then. The Groundhog Day-like repetition aside, we do need significant and increasing urgency around Paris 2015 and everyone should push for an aggressive agreement. Yet we also need to be cognizant of the tyranny of the "Big, Defining Moment."

The allure of the Big, Defining Moment and the strategy that goes into periodically making the annual climate negotiations Big, Defining Moments is clear. The world has operated for the last 25 or so year on the assumption (perhaps faulty as the shifts above may demonstrate) that solving climate change must start with a grand international bargain. Paris is the next chance to cement a bargain and hence the strategy of upping the ante on the urgency in the lead up to the negotiations. The heightened anxiety in the discourse is, at least in part, about building momentum to the Big, Defining Moment. It is probably working. We are seeing significant momentum building—from the Pope's encyclical, to celebrity involvement, to announcements from the U.S. and China about progress that's already being made. This is the necessity of the Big, Defining Moment—a means to clarify the minds of the politicians and diplomats that are shaping what will become the Paris agreement as well as the minds of the public. Responding to climate change requires an enormous amount of effort. Serious political will and public pressure are necessary to fuel this effort. Big, Defining Moments are a great means to generate both, at least in the short term.

The real tyranny of the Big, Defining Moment comes later, either when the Moment fails to deliver (as happened when Hopenhagen became Brokenhagen in 2009) or when we realize how much real work and potential for failure comes after the Moment (as the aftermath of Kyoto, a successful Moment at the time of its signing, taught us). The tyranny of the Big, Defining Moment is that the build up around it can make us forget that it is a means, not an end. These moments are only useful or important if they help catalyze and further the long-term transformation at multiple levels that the global response to climate change entails.

Responding to climate change is a long game with a series of focusing events along the way. We have to hope and struggle to ensure that Moments like Paris 2015 move the process of transformation forward. But we also must resist the temptation to make them more than they are. Moments must not be mistaken for solutions to climate change when they succeed and they must not be mistaken for the dashing of our last hope when they fail to live up to expectations. The global response to climate change is now more and more a matter of a multitude of initiatives pushing for decarbonization and this means that the global response is a series of pathways and transformations that we need to invent over a long period. This mindset does not relieve the pressure to act—we need to be actively

inventing and transforming and getting going quickly. We need a series of wins and Big, Defining Moments that generate both momentum in the lead up to them *and* results that can be built upon by nation-states, sub-national governments, cities, NGOs, and corporations. Interim moments help construct the pathways to decarbonization. But we must take care to understand the relationship between the short game of Big, Defining Moments and the long game of decarbonization. We have to ensure that our creation of Big, Defining Moments is done in the service of furthering the multiple kinds of transformation that will be ongoing after everyone goes home from Paris.

References

Andonova, Liliana, Michele Betsill and Harriet Bulkeley. (2009). Transnational Climate Governance. *Global Environmental Politics* 9 (2): 52-73.

Bernstein, Steven and Matthew Hoffmann. (2015). The Politics of Decarbonization: A Framework and Method. Draft Manuscript.

Bulkeley H, Andonova L, Bäckstrand K, Betsill M, Compagnon D, Duffy R, Kolk A, Hoffmann M, Levy D, Newell P, Milledge T, Paterson M, Pattberg P, VanDeveer S. (2012). "Governing climate change transnationally: assessing the evidence from a database of sixty initiatives." *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 30(4) 591 – 612.

Depledge, Joanna. (2006). "The Opposite of Learning: Ossification in the Climate Change Regime." *Global Environmental Politics* 6(1): 1-22.

Dimitrov, Rado. (2002). "Confronting Non-Regimes: Science and International Coral Reef Policy. *Journal of Environment and Development*, vol. 11, no. 1: 53-78.

Hoffmann, Matthew. (2011). *Climate Governance at the Crossroads: Experimenting with a Global Response after Kyoto*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hoffmann, Matthew. (2013). "Global Climate Change." *Handbook of Global Climate and Environment Policy* edited by Robert Falkner. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Levin, Kelly, Benjamin Cashore, Steven Bernstein, and Graeme Auld. (2012). "Overcoming the Tragedy of Super Wicked Problems: Constraining our Future Selves to Ameliorate Global Climate Change." *Policy Sciences* 45, no. 2: 123-152.

Unruh, Gregory C. (2000). "Understanding Carbon Lock-in." *Energy Policy* 28, no. 12: 817-830.

Victor, David. (2011). *Global Warming Gridlock*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.