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Debate: Climate change and COP21 Paris – Addressing the ultimate 'wicked issue'

In December 2015, a host of world leaders, non-governmental organisations and other actors assembled in Paris for the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) meeting on climate change. Some groups have questioned whether the resulting agreement to reduce emissions and carbon dioxide and other global warming gases may be sufficient to keep the increase in global temperatures below 2°C, the threshold above which we risk potentially catastrophic 'runaway' climate change (Stern, 2008). Nonetheless, it does represent the most ambitious and robust global compact on carbon dioxide reduction and climate adaptation measures since the Kyoto Protocol in 1997.

Pollitt (2015) writing in this journal, speaking later at a recent PMM event hosted by Lord Bichard at the House of Lords that both authors attended, and writing in his follow-up Debate piece in this journal, Christopher Pollitt (2016) stressed how climate change is a 'wicked' issue. Rittel and Webber (1973) were the first to use this term to describe problems that encompassed a range of stakeholders (including non-state actors) and required decision-makers to integrate objectives across different policy sectors. Furthermore, policy-makers can only really address (never really solve) wicked issues to ameliorate their negative impacts, and often have to take decisions based on incomplete or contradictory knowledge. This makes it very difficult to agree a common way forward, because some stakeholders may even disagree about the nature or extent of the problem. Crucially, however, they often need to change their behaviour to address the issue effectively: in other words they play a key role in policy implementation.

As this suggests, persuading some national governments to commit to carbon dioxide reductions may just be the easy part – delivering this agreement is likely to be the real challenge (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). Indeed, Ferry attended COP21 in Paris alongside Gino Van Begin, Secretary General of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability, and highlighted that “the war will be lost or won during 'implementation' at sub-national government levels and such battles will require the active support and engagement of both businesses and civil society.”

In his debate piece, Pollitt outlines four ‘common denominators’ that he feels are required to address climate change effectively: more joined-up policy-making across and between levels of government; rapid response monitoring and evaluation to identify innovative practice; more long-term policy-making; and public engagement to persuade and cajole citizens to behave in a more environmentally-responsible manner. In addition, we would argue that public bodies also need to address working 'cultures' and not just their 'structures' in order to innovate (see Ferry et al 2017); as well as have the requisite skills to measure progress against objectives to reduce carbon dioxide.

Subnational governments have a key role to play in this process – something that the original Rio Earth Summit recognised back in 1992 through the Agenda 21 process, and which a number of academics (mostly geographers) have been stressing for some time (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003). However, the wicked nature of the issue means that neither central nor sub-national governments have the capacity to achieve this alone. One author recently conducted a study of climate change governance in German and English cities, and found that the former were able to be more ambitious and hierarchical in policy-making arrangements because of the extra support they received from higher tiers of government (Eckersley, 2016). This support

did not just relate to the amount of money the council received in direct grants and the freedom to levy local taxes (although these were important). Crucially, it also extended to the legal context (because the status of German councils is guaranteed in the constitution and they can rely on a more robust planning framework for sustainable development), technical advice, and the fact that they had not been required to relinquish control over local services such as transport and utilities. Overall, these factors meant that they exercised much more direct influence over other actors within the locality.

Councils in the UK have responded to their weaker position by collaborating with other local actors (including from the private and voluntary sectors) and neighbouring authorities, as they seek out additional support (Ferry, 2011). Given that climate change is a wicked issue that requires a response from interest groups and private citizens, as well as public bodies, this is a necessary course of action – the state cannot address the issue alone.

However, the UK Government's response is unlikely to address all of the common denominators that Pollitt identifies. For example, 'localism' will almost certainly lead to different tiers of government becoming less joined-up (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2013), and the austerity agenda has not encouraged policy-makers to foster innovation or take a longer-term perspective (Ferry et al., 2017). In this regard, Ferry also mentioned at COP21 it is important that we understand modes of governing municipalities, partners and grassroots groups (Ahrens and Ferry, 2015) and ensure that accountability and transparency arrangements are robust (Ferry et al., 2015). Finally, the overall fragmentation and weakening of public institutions in the UK since the 1970s has reduced their influence over private actors, which makes the job of persuading (or particularly requiring) citizens and businesses to change their behaviour more challenging.

Nonetheless, considering how great the threat of a changing climate is for the future of existing human and natural systems, it is crucial that we succeed in this task. We therefore join the chorus for more ‘robust’ debate, but especially action, on sustainability.

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