Coping with uncertainty

Accountability challenges in global climate governance

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Climate change is considered to be the greatest current challenge facing humanity. The range of impacts and implications are vast, and the required public policy and individual behavioural responses reach across many fields including the economy, the environment, society and technology. In addition, climate change also poses a significant political challenge, as the scope and ramifications of what needs to be agreed at global level may go beyond what the existing nation-state interest and negotiation based global governance systems are able to deliver effectively, and this within an ever contracting timetable for action.

Ahead of the Copenhagen Summit and drawing on a growing range of documentary evidence and interviews with politicians, scientists, and organisational representatives, a One World Trust study on accountability challenges in global climate governance has begun to yield some insights into areas in which more attention may be required, and where opportunities for strengthening accountability may exist. Key issues emerging so far include:

- Citizens are asking for firm leadership on climate change issues. At the same time evidence and questions of strategy on which actors involved in determining policy rely are fraught with uncertainty. Yet the different communities of scientists, civil society activist, special interest lobby groups, policy makers and legislators do not cope well with these uncertainties, and communications to the public are often dominated by commercial and political competition rather than the necessary dialogue.
- The need to ensure broad based buy-in across party lines or across nation states for common, long term policies and regulation involves tensions between what evidence suggests needs to be done, and what can be agreed. This increases the risk of global actors jointly failing to deliver results that ensure a sustainable climate is preserved as global public good for citizens.
- Finally, the negotiation based nature of the global climate governance process makes it hard for citizens, especially the most affected by climate change, to identify a key channel, let alone a single locus of accountability for the governance system as a whole. Possible alternative routes through formal national democratic institutions or civil society organisations are very skew in their potential, as especially people in critically important countries such as emerging economies, often have neither of these accountability mechanisms at their disposal.

Introduction

Climate change is considered to be the greatest current challenge facing humanity. The range of impacts and implications is vast, and the required public policy and individual behavioural responses reach across many fields including; the economy, the environment, society and technology[1]. In addition, climate change also poses a significant political challenge, as the scope and ramifications of what needs to be agreed at global level may go beyond what the existing nation-state interest and negotiation based global governance systems are able to deliver effectively[2], and this within an ever contracting timetable for action[3]. To compound the issues, policy and decision makers working to develop responses to climate change have to accept a significant degree of uncertainty about the current and future environmental dynamics in relation to climate change[4]. In addition to limited knowledge about the actual potential of emissions reductions, and the impact of mitigation strategies and technologies[5], a continuing and ethically difficult debate about how to best and most accurately model economic impacts of climate change creates further frictions between the different types of actors involved in shaping global public policy in this field[6].

In an ongoing research project the One World Trust explores the nature of the accountability issues involved in a global climate governance system, tasked with delivering the global public good of a stable climate for citizens today and in the future.[7] In its first phase, the study seeks to understand how influential actors in the policy formation process realise key accountability principles[8] in their stakeholder relationships, which sources of evidence they draw on to develop their policy or regulatory propositions, and how transparent and participatory their processes are for translating evidence into policy. Case study organisations were selected from different streams which feed into the global policy formation process. These include: Greenpeace International (GPI) as a civil society advocacy organisation, the International Emissions Trading Association (IETA) as an industry lobbying group, the UNFCCC as a global convenor and regulator, and the UK Parliament as a national legislator and policy oversight body.

Ahead of the Copenhagen Summit, drawing on a growing range of documentary evidence and interviews with politicians, scientists, and organisational representatives, this study has begun to yield some insights into areas, in which accountability of the current global climate governance process may require more attention, and where opportunities for strengthening accountability may exist.

Difficulties in understanding and coping with uncertainty

Engaging in global climate governance, i.e. the processes through which global public policy and individual behaviours in response to climate change are being shaped, formulated and

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[1] International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007): Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, Pachauri, R.K and Reisinger, A.(eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, 104 pp.

[2] Newell, P. (2001): New Environmental Architectures and the Search for Effectiveness, in: Global Environmental Politics, 1, 1, 35-44.

[3] Mayer, A. (2001): Contraction and Convergence: The Global solution to Climate Change, Schumacher Briefings,

[4] Oppenheimer, M; O'Neill, B; Webster, M.; Agrawala, S. (2007): Climate Change: The Limits to Consensus, in: Science, 317, 5844, 1505-1506.

[5] Bohringer, C.; Mennel, T.; Rutherfors, T. (2009): Technological Change and Uncertainty in Environmental Economics, in: Energy Economics, 31, 1, 1-3.

[6] Stern, N. (2005): The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK

[7] Kaul, I.; ed. UNDP (2002): Profiling the Provision status of Global Public Goods, Office of Development Studies, New York.

[8] The research uses the One World Trust Global Accountability Framework (One World Trust (2005): Pathways to Accountability. The Global Accountability Framework, London) as a conceptual starting point for this work, but concentrates on transparency and participation as key dimensions.

agreed[9], involves decision makers and citizens engaging with the evidence at their disposal, especially regarding proposed solutions that still involve a significant level of uncertainty. This is occurring exactly at a time when people around the world want to see leaders collectively taking decisive, evidence based action to protect livelihoods and ensure a sustainable environment for the current population of countries on this earth, and for future generations.[10]

Yet, research conducted for this project shows communication between the research community (especially scientists) and policy makers, is generally poor, particularly regarding how to deal with uncertainty. Linked to this, responses by members of the research, advocacy, and policy making / legislative communities interrogated for this project, illustrate that there is generally only a limited reciprocal understanding of (or time for understanding of) the deeper epistemological underpinnings of the ways the different spheres work. In result, members of these communities reported that at times they felt that their assumptions, abstractions and simplifications, insistence on detail, or caveats concerning their findings were being misunderstood, misrepresented or even abused in public discourse by their counterparts. An example raised in several interviews was for instance the case of cost and value parameters used in economic models, and how these were debated and often rejected on ethical grounds, without alternatives and impact of such alternatives being discussed dispassionately. In other cases requirements of quality assurance considered essential for instance in research were reported to have lead to perceptions of unhelpful delays in the provision of evidence for the purposes of policy making.

Lack of transparency in the transition from evidence to policy

Despite drawing in public presentations on a largely homogenous and widely accepted body of evidence, as for instance represented in the IPCC assessment reports, or declarations of buy-in to the goals of the UNFCCC, different organisations from all sectors come to often significantly varying and potentially incompatible policy propositions. Examples raised by interlocutors include the use of carbon trading, carbon capture and storage, or reliance on specific types of energy (renewable, nuclear or fossil) for a sustainable transition to a low carbon economy. The process of the transformation of declared evidence to advocacy positions remains particularly opaque in the case of lobbying, advocacy and commercial organisations. In interviews these actors often assert that it is for reasons of strategic autonomy, or the search for competitiveness, that they are not open to participation of others in the review of evidence, and the decision making processes regarding policy advocacy. In consequence, and independent of the coherence of the policy conclusions with any evidence used, the interested research and policy community, or individual consumers for that matter, lack the opportunity to form an independent view on the relevance and rigour of the propositions put forward and whom to support. Further, respondents report that there is frequently no direct dialogue between proponents of contradicting policy propositions, even though the content of their propositions is publicly discussed by each side.

[9] Newell, P (2008): The Political Economy of Global Environmental Governance, in: Review of International Studies, 34, 507-529.

[10] The TckTckTck campaign for a firm, ambitious and binding (FAB) agreement to be achieved at Copenhagen (http://tcktcktck.org) and the 350 (parts per million of carbon in the atmosphere) campaign (http://www.350.org/) are examples for civil society alliance based global mobilisation of citizens and communities for substantive progress in Copenhagen.

Tensions between the aim to meet the substantive aims of a legislative initiative, and the need to achieve cross-party or international agreement

For any piece of wide ranging legislation, on which governmental action needs to be carried forward over several elections, reliance on a party majority is a recipe for failure. The case of agreeing the 2008 Climate Change Act was a good example where the House of Commons majority was significantly reaching across party lines[11]. Building a cross party consensus, including demonstrated expert support and economic feasibility was crucial. The Joint Pre-legislative Scrutiny Committee also pointed out that while the Bill was intended as a piece of national legislation, it should also "demonstrate international leadership, and set a practical example which would help to galvanise action on an international scale"[12]. In line with good practice, the Committee set out its review questions as a base line review framework in its call for evidence, i.e. ahead of the actual submission of views.

Yet, as in most scrutiny processes, Parliamentarians remained to some extent dependent on the draft legislation and its supporting documentation, such as White Papers put before them by government. Parliamentarians have also shown themselves as keenly aware of their task to achieve a sustainable consensus within the set timeframe of the parliamentary agenda, and against public expectations, to pass a Bill into law. The expectation that legislation would represent a framework enabling the achievement of a radical vision for the delivery of a global public good, may well exist amongst some giving evidence[13], but is not the likely outcome of a legislative process. Legislation passed is described by interlocutors more in terms of a highest achievable common denominator based compromise between a whole range of concerns and evidence, presented publicly and privately. It necessarily entails a reduction in rigour and focus.[14] Put more categorically, even Parliamentarians who had worked for a long time and with strong ideals for the Climate Change Act expected it like every piece of legislation to fall short of what is needed, but at least offering a way forward most can live with. In the worst case however, it was acknowledged that the parliamentary process can lead to results which simply reflect the interests of the strongest lobby, and/or local concerns of parliamentarians to address the most immediate needs and worries of their constituents. The more climate change issues move from global target discussions to concrete choices about national energy, business development, taxation, and employment market policies, the greater the tension between legislation transporting a normative vision for the future and reflecting a balance of special interests will become. A view held by some interlocutors of the Copenhagen process was that the international negotiations had already reached that stage.

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[11] Majority of 463 at the House of Commons 3rd Reading including 131 Conservative, 52 Liberal Democrat and 19 from other parties (http://www.publicwhip.org.uk/division.php?date=2008-10-28&number=298&dmp=1030),

[12] UK Parliament (2007): Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill - First Report, Session 2006/2007, paragraph 14 (HL Paper 170-I, HC 542-I, 22 July 2007)

[13] In his Memorandum submitted to the Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill Aubrey Meyer, Global Commons Institute, for instance criticises the use of a 60% by 2050 target because in his view it will still be too low. The reality of the legislative and wider international negotiation process on targets however demonstrate that working to even higher thresholds is unlikely to be an agreed outcome in most countries or for the world alone. (UK Parliament (2007): Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill - First Report, Session 2006/2007, oral and Written Evidence, HL Paper 170-II, HC 542-II, 22 July 2007 UK Parliament (2007): Joint Committee on the Draft Climate Change Bill - First Report, Session 2006/2007, paragraph 14 (HL Paper 170-I, HC 542-I, 22 July 2007, ev 392).

[14] Echoing former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's assertion that only people able to compromise can be good politicians and that the result of their work therefore always involves some degree of watering down in comparison against original intentions (Schmidt, Helmut (2007): The Ethos of the Politician, 7th Weltethos Lecture 2007, http://www.weltethos.org/00--home/helmut-schmidt-rede.htm (in German)

No clear focal point for accountability in the global system

Finally, this research points to an indiscernible locus of accountability in the broader global governance system dealing with climate change. At present there is simply no focal point for accountability at global level that is visible and accessible for people affected by progress or failures within the global climate governance system. While a vast array of actors from research, civil society, nation states, intergovernmental organisations, the media and corporate business are involved in the formation of global climate policy, all of them would decline an individual responsibility for the outcome. This is also and particularly true for the Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC, which is the formal locus of agreeing the cornerstones of a new climate change response framework. Established under Article 7 of the UNFCCC the Conference of Parties, through its Secretariat, has a role of review and assessment of performance of nation states against the aims of the Convention, and of facilitation of steps, means and resources to achieve these. Problematically, the Secretariat as yet has no means and powers of verification and enforcement of emission targets. Unless the economic and financial incentives aimed for through the establishment of carbon trading and clean development mechanisms work, the simple review of countries' progress against agreed targets is unlikely to make these countries likely to reduce their emissions. To date countries can flout the targets they have agreed without significant implications as there is no deterrent to increasing emissions. Taken together these weaknesses mean that the Secretariat and the COP itself have no identity as bodies for which citizens could establish oversight and scrutiny, beyond organising civil society or using national parliamentary reporting to monitor on progress or the lack of it.[15]

The second route of accountability is using parliamentary oversight to ensure public scrutiny, to hold the global community to account for its achievements and failings with regards to climate change. However, this only works through the filter of holding national governments to account over their individual positions and activities in negotiations.

In most countries this remains a weak tool. The potential of democratic involvement of citizens and national parliamentary oversight to contribute more broadly and independently to China's or Russia's policy at international level for instance has yet to be realised[16], and civil society organisations in these countries have limited freedom to play this role[17]. While India is the world's largest democracy, social movements are understandably primarily concerned with issues of social mobility and poverty reduction, and parliament is struggling to cope with domestic legislative workload[18].

Yet, also in the 'mature' democracies, in which it could be assumed greater parliamentary capacity should exist to pay attention to a wider number of issues, including international affairs. Foreign policy issues are often not the primary focus of parliamentary scrutiny. And when discussed, they are generally reviewed from the point of view of national interest,

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[15] United Nations (1992): United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, FCCC/Informal/84, Art. 7, http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf

[16] See for instance on China Thornton, J.L. (2008): Long Time Coming: The Prospects for Democracy in China, in: Foreign Affairs , January/February 2008

[17] Andrew Kuchins for instance describes the authoritarian turn in Russian politics as significant also for the way its foreign policy is conducted. See Kuchins, A.C. (2006): Human Rights, Civil Society, and Democratic Governance in Russia: Current Situation and Prospects for the Future", Testimony Prepared for U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/helcommtestimony.pdf. Even though the 2006 assessment is a few years old, there is no reason to believe that important changes are under way.

[18] Hammer, M.; Boutillier, Clément, Uphadyay, Anuya (2008): Ready for the global pitch? Making the foreign policy process in emerging powers such as South Africa and India democratically sustainable, One World Trust Briefing paper number 110, May 2008

which in turn reinforces the fragmented and negotiation based nature of governance of global issues including climate change.[19]

Conclusion

Addressing climate change is not only difficult because it is a task that asks for timely and bold transnational agreements, across the traditional divides of rich and poor, industrial and developing, as well as cultural, social and political boundaries. It is also a supreme challenge because those agreements need to be built on a still evolving understanding of how environmental factors and variables affect climate today and in the future. This is combined with uncertainties around the current and future potential of proposed measures to mitigate greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere. The question of how the economic costs of adaptation and mitigation can be calculated and met at global and national levels causes additional difficulties. Moreover, introducing the necessary systems that will provide a sound basis for the regulation of human economic activity and environmental impact, and modelling how the different behaviour of individuals (or nations through policy), will in aggregate help or hamper efforts to stabilise climate change, represents a further challenge.

Yet, despite 'uncertainty' thus being a defining feature at least in the detail of evidence and policy choices in climate governance, it emerges from this ongoing study that the communities involved in producing, using and communicating evidence and in the case of policy makers and legislators making regulatory decisions, do not cope well with this issue of uncertainty. This is particularly problematic at a time when citizens challenge policy makers and legislators to provide firm leadership on the big picture issues, and results in a lack of a necessary dispassionate and transparent communication between the different actors involved in the governance process, and towards the general public about how they translate evidence into policy propositions.

Interlocutors report that important assumptions and elements in methodologies that underpin evidence are being dealt with by different actors often controversially, and apparently with the aim to maximise competitive and strategic advantages in the market place or on advocacy. In consequence tensions between what evidence suggests ought to be done and what can be politically agreed increase. Broad based buy-in across party lines and internationally, for long term policies and regulation may thus become increasingly difficult to obtain and results then easily fall short of what is required, to achieve the global public good of a stable climate.

Finally, the negotiation based nature of the global climate governance process makes it hard for citizens, especially the most affected by climate change, to identify a key channel, let alone a locus of accountability for the governance system as a whole. Possible alternative routes through formal national democratic institutions or civil society organisations are very skew in their potential, as especially people in critically important countries such as emerging economies, often have neither of these accountability mechanisms at their disposal.

[19] While the need for integrated and above all greater scrutiny of international affairs by national parliaments is evoked also by the International Parliamentary Union (IPU) (see International Parliamentary Union (2005): Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments, New York 5-7 September 2005, research conducted by One World Trust, Democratic Audit and Federal Trust on the UK showed for the period of 2004 to 2008 significant deficits in culture, consistency and resourcing of effective oversight of international affairs ("A World Of Difference (2007): Parliamentary Oversight of British Foreign Policy, London, One World Trust).

Decisions taken by global organisations and powerful nation-states in the field of global environmental governance have a huge impact on the lives of individual citizens around the world. This paper is part of a research project on accountability in global climate change governance. With our research and recommendations for reform we seek to strengthen and improve the responsible and mutual engagement of citizens, parliamentarians and decision-makers in government and global organisations in the formulation and oversight of global policy in the domain of sustainable development and global environmental governance.