Curbing Climate Change Requires Addressing National Politics

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While activists are gearing up to demonstrate at the international negotiations on climate change in Paris this December, the real decisions are being made at the national level. And that's where the pressure needs to be.

Tens of thousands of protesters joined together in Copenhagen in 2009 to protest world leaders' minimal concern for the planet. People marched in the streets and NGOs tried to fill the convention hall and influence policymaking at the largest ever demonstration during the international climate change negotiations. And yet not much was influenced. Climate change is still warming up the planet and we have not begun to reduce our emissions to the extent needed to turn the tide.

The problem with protesting international conventions – like the protests being planned for the upcoming climate change convention in Paris – is that by that point it is likely to be too late to influence things. International bodies such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have little power beyond forming a basis for countries to negotiate between themselves. The famous Kyoto Protocol has been entered and exited by Canada without much consequence and similar moves were considered by other countries. Dropping out may lose them credibility with other countries, but that's back to being a national issue.

Likewise, the United States, a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions had signed but not ratified the Kyoto Protocol meaning that while the Kyoto Protocol was in effect it did not include a major contributor to the cause of climate change. To try to tempt the United States to ratify, the negotiations were watered down for everyone. The Kyoto Protocol ended up being a minor stepping stone, but without further international commitments our next step may drown us.

Social movements need to target key countries because they affect negotiations the most and without them curbing climate change seems to be impossible. China is now the number one greenhouse gas emitter so it needs to step up, but it also feels it deserves the right to have economic growth – which at this point still means burning fossil fuels. Canada has walked out on Kyoto as it surpassed its emissions target by a wide margin. They need to be

forced back to the table. Japan is also very hesitant about signing up to emissions reduction targets and Russia only signed up to Kyoto because it was given significant leeway with its own target (as well as support to join the WTO).

All of these countries need to become serious players in pushing for emissions reductions but there's not enough immediate incentive to do so. While the effects of climate change are already occurring, they hit the poorest the most. Rich countries can adapt to some of the climatic changes while poor countries are already suffering from droughts, floods, and famines despite the fact they contribute the least when it comes to emissions.

Protests, demonstrations, large-scale campaigns and smaller-scale community organizing: these can be the forces that put pressure on these countries. Movements can sway votes. They can increase costs to countries that do not play ball. They can threaten the seats of elected officials. They can create change. And it has already been done in the UK.

The new book Climate Change and Social Movements: Civil Society and the Development of National Climate Change Policy shows that while the United Kingdom was already acknowledging the problem of climate change it had failed to do much about the countries own emissions until the climate change movement stepped in.

As the book notes, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (of all people) was the first world leader to talk about climate change but her record on the environment was anything but stellar. At the time the UK was known as 'the dirty man of Europe'. When Tony Blair became Prime Minister he took up the issue of climate change when it came to international dialogue but it was not until the climate change movement pressured him to act did he really do much about it.

In 2005, Friends of the Earth organized a massive campaign: The Big Ask. They called on the government to legislate 80% reductions to greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. This was indeed a big ask and it required participation of thousands of people before the government agreed to introduce their own legislation. That was not the end. The government's draft of the legislation was weaker than the campaign had hoped. It only promised a 60% reduction. It took additional campaigning with added public pressure before the government decided to leave it up to a panel of independent experts who also recommended the 80% figure.

But that was not all. Despite agreeing to the legislation, the government wanted to approve the construction of a new runway at the hub airport in London, Heathrow. This third runway would have meant increased emissions from aviation. Again, campaigners came together to stop the initiative. While local community members fought to stop the destruction of their local area to make room for more air and noise pollution, climate activists set up an outdoor camp which served as a central location for organizing actions. The campaign led to a huge amount of media attention and the major political parties decided to back away from their plans to approve the airport's expansion so as not to lose votes in the upcoming election.

The lessons that can be drawn from the book can be applied to other national efforts to influence the political decisions of major emitting countries. But it is not enough to simply show up during the international negotiations. At the end of the day the power is still found at the level of countries, not in international conventions.