

COMMENTARY

The global architecture for climate action: Lessons for the education sector?

Liesbet Steer and Andrew Steer¹

The logo for The Education Commission, featuring the text "the Education Commission" in white on a green square background.

Concern has been growing that SDG4 is seriously off-track. While this was already becoming evident even before the COVID-19 pandemic, recent months have sharply reinforced a sense that an entire generation of children may be deprived of good quality education. The [UN Secretary General's Policy Brief](#) and the [Save Our Future](#) campaign have documented how the COVID-19 crisis has compounded and magnified the world's pre-existing education crisis, putting the futures of an entire generation at risk.

So the path to SDG 4 is failing badly, and the international interest in education is a small fraction of what it needs to be. In virtually every country, education tops the list on surveys of what citizens want for a better future, but the global community has not prioritized education accordingly.

This raises an urgent question: is the global architecture supporting education organized for success?

This note describes the global architecture of another important crisis – climate change – and how it has benefitted from a rich array of formal and informal mechanisms that, combined, have created a sense of ownership, accountability, common purpose, and opportunity that appear to be leading to a positive inflection point.

Moving the needle towards hope

A wicked problem. Climate change is perhaps the most difficult global collective action problem the world has ever had to face. It represents the biggest market failure in history, with potentially catastrophic implications. It involves massive issues of international and inter-generational equity – between those who created the problem and those who suffer from it, and between this generation and future generations. Its solution requires fundamental restructuring of the economy – in energy, agriculture, transportation, manufacturing, and in the way we consume and how we live our lives. This requires extraordinary political leadership, great disruption, and massive investments.

An inflection point? Until recently, these challenges have seemed insurmountable and have led to considerable pessimism. And yet in the past six years the prospects for success have risen well

¹ The authors are respectively Director of the Education Commission, and President and CEO of the World Resources Institute. This is an informal note that represents the views of the authors.



beyond the hopes of most expert observers. Over 100 countries – including the three mega-polluters -- China, the US, and the EU – have committed to achieve net zero emissions by mid-century, as have 1500 global corporations and 11,000 cities. Multilateral development banks (MDBs) and bilateral donors are ramping up their climate programs at a rate unprecedented for any sector at any time, and private financial markets are shifting rapidly: over \$20 trillion in assets under management are now committed to align themselves to net zero emissions, and asset holders, employees, and citizens' groups are demanding dramatic shifts in behavior from corporations and governments. By 2030, the EU will have lowered emissions by 55%, the UK by 65%, and the US (if President Biden gets his way) by around 50%. By 2030, the internal combustion engine will be on its way out, and coal will account for a tiny share of new power generation investments.

Success in the battle against climate change is certainly not guaranteed. The window of opportunity is shrinking, and very difficult challenges remain. The changes taking place are requiring brave political decisions and huge sums of money. As in the case of the COVID pandemic, success requires a sense of war footing. But there is now a real sense of hope.

How did climate create momentum?

Creating a movement for change often involves these common elements:

- **Evidence of the problem**, well-monitored and well-communicated
- **Evidence that success is possible**, and beneficial for citizens and politicians
- **Bottom-up citizen voice**, which persuades governments more than policy briefs
- **Top-down political drive**, which drives policy and public spending

In the case of climate action, each of these elements has helped to create a common motivating narrative. But often, less obvious elements in the global architecture can be even more influential. These were particularly important for climate change:

- **Coalitions for change**: a group of “soulmate” leaders – committed to change, sharing experiences, and encouraging each other
- **Deep multistakeholder ownership of the issue**, encouraged by shared leadership, and multiple strands of dialogue and mobilization

Combined, these have created a sense of excitement around the climate issue, and what have become known as “ambition loops” – an upward spiral of mutual encouragement among governments, corporations, financial institutions, and civil society. This has inspired a feeling that “we’re in the fight of our lives, and we’re in it together.” Any serious leader would surely want to play a role in finding a solution!

The rest of this note will explore these less-tangible aspects of the emergence of a movement.



Global governance for a global issue?

As the ultimate global issue, one would expect that any progress in addressing climate change would surely need centralized global governance and collective action. Interestingly, despite climate's clear global and cross-border relevance, its governance is remarkably decentralized.

In some key areas – climate negotiations and associated targets, monitoring and accountability – it is certainly centralized under the UNFCCC.² Each year negotiators gather for the two-week Conference of the Parties (COP). This provides a vital overall framing of the issues, aggregate target-setting, an accountability mechanism, and an overall sense of urgency. Under the [*Paris Climate Agreement*](#), all commitments are voluntary, but countries are obliged to report their goals and achievements to the UNFCCC and have their performance peer reviewed.

But beyond this, activities, dialogues, coalitions, finance, and momentum in the climate field are surprisingly distributed. This gives the issue its energy and momentum.

The roots of a decentralized approach. When UNEP (UN Environment Program) was established at the 1972 Stockholm Conference, there were high hopes for strongly coordinated global leadership on international rules, norms, and behaviors on the environment. But by the time the 1992 Rio Earth Summit was being prepared, it was clear that this was not the approach that was most likely to have the necessary impact.³ The view of the UN Secretary-General and many governments was that these major global issues were too important to be left to environment ministries. They required a much bigger lift and a whole of government solution, in which economic, development and foreign ministries, MDBs, corporations, and NGOs all exercise ownership and leadership.

The inclusive approach of UNFCCC. The UNFCCC Secretariat plays a crucial role in managing the highly complex process of getting 197 countries to agree to setting goals for climate change, implementing rules of the Convention, and supervising the required reporting. It also plays a critical role in creating an authorizing environment and a sense of urgency for action. The past two heads of the UNFCCC – Christiana Figueres and Patricia Espinosa – have both brought to the job a very deep commitment to the urgency of the task and a very pragmatic and politically astute approach to finding solutions. In particular, they have been clear that while they can *help* create the political context through their convening of negotiations, the real action lies elsewhere. Recognizing the scale of the challenge, they have actively encouraged the emergence of multi-stakeholder dialogues and coordination mechanisms outside the UNFCCC process.

² UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Its Secretariat sits in Bonn.

³ UNEP played an important role in the preparations of the Rio Summit and in setting up the emerging conventions of the 1980s and 1990s – on climate change, biodiversity, ozone, and desertification – but did not lead them. Each of these conventions and initiatives have over the years been forced to be creative and imaginative, each creating multi-stakeholder coalitions to create momentum.



These complementary processes, sometimes referred to as “track 2” processes, deal with practical solutions and finance, and have helped depoliticize the process.

Building momentum on multiple levels

Government-led processes. Examples of influential fora include the annual *Petersberg Climate Dialogue*, managed by the German government and created by Angela Merkel in 2009 to provide an informal forum for policymakers from around 40 governments to mutually encourage higher ambition. This past year the Japanese government also organized a high-level meeting for 50 ministers with the same end. Under the Obama administration, the US organized an annual *Major Emitters Forum*, bringing together the 30 or so countries that will make all the difference. On April 22, 2021 President Biden will re-establish a new version of this at the head of government level. This year’s meetings of the G20, hosted by Italy, and G7, hosted by the UK, will both place climate change high on their agendas. In each of these cases UNFCCC, UNEP, and other UN agencies will engage actively. They will not lead but will support those who do.

Multi-stakeholder coalitions and leadership. These coalitions have been crucially important over the past few years. Some of these take the form of commissions. Thus, for example, the *Global Commission on the Economy and Climate* (chaired by President Felipe Calderon, and more recently by Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Paul Polman, and Lord Nicholas Stern) has played a vital role in reshaping the understanding of climate economics. The *Global Adaptation Commission* (co-chaired by Bill Gates, Kristalina Georgieva, and Ban Ki-moon) played the same role for adaptation and is leading to new financial mechanisms. Sectoral initiatives, such as the *Energy Transition Commission*, the *Food and Land Use Alliance*, the *Tropical Forest Alliance*, etc., all provide high-energy engagement at a very senior level. The World Economic Forum has also played a key role by convening heads of state together with corporate and civil society CEOs to advance ambition. They also run coalitions of CEOs committed to action, seeking to create a spirit of healthy competition as leaders egg each other on. In all of these, the sense of “ambition loop” is central. In almost all of these processes the key UN agencies (UNFCCC, UNEP, UNDP, WMO, etc.), are constructively engaged, as are the international financial institutions.

Climate finance initiatives. Progress on climate finance has been mixed, but the positives strongly outweigh the negatives. On the negative side, when world leaders agreed at the Copenhagen COP in 2009 to provide \$100 billion per year by 2020, they did so without agreement on what was meant by this commitment: only grants, or also soft loans? Only public, or also private? The \$100 billion has become a politically important issue and has still not been delivered under most definitions. What has become clear is that it will require thinking beyond traditional instruments. This year will be crucial in demonstrating it can be achieved.

Critically, it is now recognized that financing needs will only be met by combining financing from all actors in new and innovative ways. Important actors are ministers of finance, donors, MDBs, the private



sector, and big philanthropies. The climate sector has been at the frontiers of financial innovation with numerous public and private initiatives⁴ that generate billions of dollars.

Financial issues have generally not been coordinated by the UN, with one important exception. At the UNFCCC COP in 2010 in Cancun, Mexico, it was agreed to create a *Green Climate Fund* (GCF) to channel large sums of money (many believed that the \$100 billion would be channeled through the GCF annually) to climate action. The GCF, now up and running, is disbursing around \$3 billion per year. While this is significant, it had earlier been hoped by some negotiators that the GCF would become *the* financing mechanism. However, it quickly became clear that most donors would place only a fraction of their climate finance through it, believing that other funds and channels were sometimes more effective, and less politically influenced.

More encouraging has been the progress in climate finance more broadly. The Secretary-General's Special Envoy on Climate Finance, Mark Carney⁵ (until last year Governor of the Bank of England) is very active driving a coalition of public and private financiers, rewriting rules on climate disclosure, and designing a greatly scaled-up carbon market. He has full authority to take whatever initiatives he chooses, and takes advantage of this, with full support from the UN and other official bodies.

A *Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action* includes ministers from 60 countries, and the *Network for Greening Financial Systems* represents central banks and financial regulators from 89 countries. Both of these are lively networks, sharing best practices on how to incorporate climate change into financial regulation and fiscal policy.

The MDBs run several specialized funds (e.g. the \$8 billion *Climate Investment Funds* have provided leverage across all the major MDBs). Climate has helped create a strong partnership among the MDBs, working together on definitions of climate finance, coordinating programs, and struggling together on what constitutes alignment of a bank portfolio to the Paris goal of a 1.5 °C climate target. The intellectual and practical challenge of a massive scaling of climate finance has encouraged a constructive sense of competition. Different members of the MDB group have taken it in turn to drive the agenda.

National-level development banks have also been highly active. Their *International Development Finance Consortium* (IDFC) with its 26 members and \$600 billion in annual commitments is also highly active in sharing best practices, seeking to ramp up climate ambition, and actively engaging in international processes.

⁴ One of many initiatives is the Global Innovation Lab for Climate Finance, an initiative of over 60 public and private investors and institutions that identifies, develops, and launches finance instruments.

⁵ UN Special Envoys have played a significant role in climate, both convening and catalyzing major initiatives. In addition to Mark Carney as Special Envoy for Climate Finance, Michael Bloomberg (former mayor of NYC and US presidential candidate) is UN Special Envoy for promoting net-zero commitments from countries, cities, and corporations.



Private sector engagement. Contrary to common perceptions, the corporate sector has played a key role in advancing action. Most forward-leaning international corporations now recognize the importance of the issue and have been responsible for not only setting their own targets, but also adding pressure to national governments and UNFCCC processes. They were influential in securing the Paris deal, convening dozens of hearings, events, and deal-making sessions, and consistently urging negotiators to show more ambition. Among UN agencies, the UN Global Compact deserves credit for supporting corporate engagement. Other organizations, such as World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and We Mean Business, and numerous NGO-linked corporate groups have helped drive the corporate movement. UNFCCC, UNEP, and UNDP all support corporate engagement, but make no claim to coordinate them.

Citizen and civil society engagement. There was a time when environmental NGOs were fiercely at odds with corporations and governments, with major ideological differences. Today, NGOs are no less energetic or committed, but the urgency of the challenge and the greater use of compelling evidence has persuaded most of them (and most leading corporations) to move away from adversarial relations towards a pragmatic focus on practical solutions. Strong differences of opinion may remain, but CSO leaders are consistently invited to participate in and even lead major meetings involving political leaders. At this year's Petersberg Climate Dialogue and the Japanese sponsored ministerial "ambition summit" an NGO leader chaired the ministerial sessions. CSOs, especially the think tank and research institutes, play a key role in provision of data, and analysis and design of solutions. CSOs often provide the secretariats for major Commissions and coalitions. As an example, the NDC Partnership, a major alliance of 120 national governments and 20 international organizations that coordinates financial support and provides knowledge and technical assistance through its implementing partners (UNDP, World Bank, WRI, GIZ, etc.), is hosted by an NGO (WRI) and UNFCCC.

Youth-led citizen action has been especially effective recently. The movements catalyzed by Greta Thunberg and other youth activists as well as groups such as Extinction Rebellion (UK), the Sunrise Movement (US), and a growing number of similar climate justice campaigning organizations around the world are having real impact on politics, legislation, and spending. Not since the first Earth Day in 1970 have there been such effective voices for the need for change.

Concluding thoughts

When facing a very difficult global problem with no real success in sight, it is natural that we should seek to centralize governance and coordination to ensure that ideas, solutions, and delivery are disciplined and effective. This can be very valuable. But to solve big and complex problems, energizing multi-stakeholder movements are as vital as any central coordination. Movements are rarely, if ever, created by coordinating committees but supported by them. They require multiple strands of ownership and distributed leadership, with passion, vision, initiative, and occasional chaos.



Climate change is far from being solved. The coming decade is decisive, and there is a real chance that we may now have reached a positive tipping point. If so, it will be due to hundreds of leaders taking initiatives and being welcomed into the broader array of established government, UN, MDB, and CSO orbits.

What might this mean for education?

We are at a pivotal moment. How can we collaborate for maximum impact and progress on our education goals? We should consider three important lessons from the climate sector:

- 1. Global coordinating structures work best when they are focused on fewer outputs, delivered in a disciplined manner. In particular they should focus on three outputs: setting targets, monitoring delivery, and ensuring accountability.** One could imagine much more wide-ranging responsibilities for the UNFCCC, including country implementation or financing – but its limited remit and detailed focus on these three tasks have been key to its success. The [SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee](#)⁶ should perhaps rise to become analogous to the “UNFCCC of education” (just as UNESCO as a whole is analogous to the “UNEP of Education”) -- with similar responsibilities for agenda-setting, targets, monitoring, and accountability.
- 2. Real change requires a variety of “track 2” processes that need to be empowered and encouraged.** The climate sector makes it clear that success will not come from trying to fit everything neatly under one central mechanism or committee but from combining a centralized framework with a variety of other critical independent processes that can help advocate, coordinate, stimulate, and finance global action. The sector needs to embrace “track 2” processes that can complement and catalyze a global movement for change and can be empowered and encouraged by the strengthened SDG-Education 2030 Education Steering Committee.
- 3. The sector needs to adopt a less adversarial, more positive, open, and solutions-driven approach to challenges.** This is urgently needed and will be critical to forming the types of coalitions that have been so game-changing in the climate sector. Education has not successfully tapped into innovative financial solutions, and the attitude of some of the key organizations towards other major stakeholders (such as the private sector or MDBs) has at times been very damaging. This has likely contributed to the sector’s inability to mobilize sufficient finance or make the private sector part of the solution. While private corporations are totally dependent on an educated workforce, and consistently express their interest in engagement, it appears that opportunities to do so in a constructive way are rarely available. Unfortunately, the link between the private sector and education appears too often to have

⁶ In October 2020 the Global Education Meeting called on UNESCO “to develop a proposal to strengthen the [SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee](#) to be able to effectively steer and coordinate the global education cooperation mechanism...”



been hijacked by debates on private education, rather than focusing on the more pressing issue of engaging the private sector in preparing young people for the workplace of tomorrow. This is perhaps analogous to the climate field two decades ago, when the corporate sector was broadly understood to be the problem rather than the solution. Attitudes have radically changed since then.

***Coda: The murmuring of starlings.** A friend of ours is the UN High-level Champion for Climate Action. He is responsible for convening multi-stakeholder coalitions with the purpose of catalyzing system-wide shifts across key sectors. His wife, a birdwatcher, remarked after witnessing several months of his high-octane activity that at times seemed uncoordinated and disjointed and yet seemed to be adding up to a gradual build-up of momentum, that it reminded her of the murmuring of starlings. This is the astonishing behavior of tens of thousands of birds, seemingly uncoordinated and with no clear leader, that fly in cloud formation making beautiful patterns in the sky. It is inspiring, beautiful to watch, inclusive, and gets the job done.*

We need a little more of this spirit.