

Europe and the Role of International Cooperation in Combatting Climate Change



by Giulio Maccarrone

For some time now, the observable reality of climate change and environmental degradation has posed significant challenges to the international community. Increasingly frequent meteorological events – such as temperature increases, storms, droughts, desertification and the disruption of ecosystems – are just some of the climate related threats that must be addressed. Given the scale of these challenges, it is clear that global level interventions are needed, thus requiring joint commitments by individual states and international organisations as well as consumers and private producers.

At the European level, significant attention has been directed at addressing environmental concerns. The European Environment Agency (EEA), established as early as 1990, aims to assist the Community and member states in protecting the environment,

integrating environmental considerations into economic policy to increase sustainability.¹ Among its numerous initiatives, the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) was established in 2005, representing a pillar of European policy to combat climate change and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in an economically efficient way. It was also the first emissions trading scheme in the world and continues to be the broadest, handling more than three quarters of international carbon trading.²

On top of these efforts, the European Green Deal, a package of measures that aims to make Europe the first carbon neutral continent in the world by

¹ EEA website: *Who We Are*, last modified 12 August 2020, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/about-us/who>.

² European Commission website: *EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS)*, https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/ets_en.

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2050,³ is the more recent and ambitious European policy on climate change. It is clear, however, that the objectives of the European Green Deal cannot be realised if Europe acts alone.

Factors causing climate change and environmental degradation are global and not limited to national borders. The European Union continues to guide international environmental efforts and has shown a willingness to create new alliances with countries committed to this process. The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy is a clear example of the support the EU provides to cities, regions, businesses and civil society organisations committed to battling climate change across the world.⁴

The Covenant is a worldwide movement launched in 2008 and its membership now includes 7,755 towns and cities across 53 different countries. It assists local bodies in accessing sustainable energy, reduce CO₂ emissions, increase energy efficiency and tap into renewable sources. After the Paris Climate Conference, the European Commission decided to extend the Covenant to other geographical areas, opening offices in Sub-Saharan Africa, North America, South America, Japan, India, China and South-East Asia.

Developments outlined above represent the most significant

initiatives undertaken over recent years by international organisations and supranational institutions. For the sake of brevity, they ignore the (numerous) actions taken by individual states. What this aims to show is that the dramatic consequences of climate change are now clearly recognised at the highest levels around the world.

Nevertheless – given that the scale of the challenge requires a global effort – the most pressing issue is whether states, through bilateral or multilateral agreements, are actually responding to these challenges, implementing sustainable policies through domestic laws and legislation. In practice, this means ensuring that economic development is conducive to effective environmental policies, not an obstacle to them.

The impact of such efforts will above all be felt among emerging and developing countries. In the current system of globalisation, where competition is the dominant and decisive factor, these states could face significant challenges due to unsustainable climate-related limitations on development.

Demographic growth in Africa and India is a driving force behind emissions of pollutants from heavy industries and factories which constitute a means of survival for tens of millions of people. In these countries, there is a need to promote facilities, funding and technical support that foster good practices for combatting climate change, but such emphasis should not act as a brake on economic development. Instead it must be directed towards sustainability, a goal

³ European Commission, *The European Green Deal* (COM/2019/640), 11 December 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019DC0640>.

⁴ Covenant of Mayors website: *Covenant Initiative*, <https://www.eumayors.eu/about/covenant-initiative/origins-and-development.html>.

that is fully compatible with respect for the planet.

Clearly such objectives pose a challenge and should be approached pragmatically. Efforts should be directed (among other things) to reconcile a now irreversible necessity to combat climate change with the backward steps taken by some states, including global powers. One example is the US's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, following the Trump administration's harsh criticism of the accord. Another is the policies of Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, who is allowing and even promoting the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest.

It is today more necessary than ever to draft legally binding agreements that oblige state signatories to report their own greenhouse gas emissions promptly and precisely. Yet, the contribution of states cannot be limited to simple reporting requirements. As already happens with the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, emissions reduction targets should be established to help ensure that global temperature rise does not exceed 1.5° Celsius.

In addition, we need to remember that climate agreements acquire genuine validity only if accompanied by credible commitments and participation by the states that have signed them. This translates not only into appropriate legislation at the national level, but also into swift ratification of international agreements (within the limits of an individual state's procedures), so that commitments are effectively implemented.

Against this backdrop, and in light of the US's distancing from climate change policies, it should fall to Europe to take on the role of a "leadiator"⁵ – that is, a leader-cum-mediator.

The EU is in a position to use its influence, expertise and financial resources to mobilise countries that are less committed to tackling climate change. The Global Covenant is an important and effective example of this capacity. The EU is responsible for financing sustainable development projects in emerging economies (relating, for example, to energy efficiency and renewable energy), via the European Investment Bank. Finance from this source is combined with funding from the Commission and from member state agencies.

To conclude – and deliberately leaving aside the geopolitical reasons for conflicting initiatives to tackle climate change and environmental degradation – it seems evident that climate change deniers and other less committed states can only be convinced via stringent multilateral agreements taking form at the global level.

Individual states must focus on concrete, attainable goals and work to strengthen their own "green" diplomacy within the context of multilateral agreements and international forums, acting where possible while hoping to inspire similar provisions in third states or communities.

⁵ Karin Bäckstrand and Ole Elgström, "The EU's Role in Climate Change Negotiations: From Leader to 'Leadiator'", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 10 (2013), p. 1369-1386.

Cooperation between individual states, supranational entities and international organisations will be crucial in this domain, as will be the EU's role in driving forward these reforms and communicating the benefits of sustainable development, both for the climate and long-term sustainability of the economy and society.

There is no time to waste and as scientists have been warning for many years, time is running out. The EU is well placed to act in this domain, building on the recent European Green Deal initiative and other strengths in Europe's toolkit to assume a greater leadership role, both regionally and internationally, to tackle the multidimensional impact of climate change in a more efficient, pragmatic and sustainable manner.

To quote Voltaire: "Men argue. Nature acts." It now stands to the EU and its member states to demonstrate leadership and capacity to act, working with international organisations, committed individuals, the private sector and interested states to translate this growing international awareness on the risks of climate change into action for a more sustainable future, both within Europe and globally.

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