

T08P03 / Climate Change and the Policy Process: Policy Reform or Transformative Change

Topic : T08 / Policy Discourse and Critical Policy Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

There is no greater challenge in this century than climate change, which portends to bring a genuine crisis in the second half of the century. Thus far the governments of the world have not risen to the occasion. While there have been initiatives, none of them credibly speak to the dimensions of the crisis ahead. For example, the Paris Agreement of 2015, while politically significant, is widely recognized to fall far short of keeping the levels of carbon in the atmosphere down to 350 parts per million, the amount needed to ward off serious consequences. Indeed, new reports suggest that we are now up to 400 parts per million and climbing. This would mean increasing levels of extreme weather across the globe, such as hurricanes and regular and extensive flooding. It would also mean dramatic increases in hunger and mass migration in response to it. Accompanying this would be heightened levels of civil and political strife by desperate people who have nothing to lose. None of this is new, but it still scarcely get the attention that it deserves, especially given the time now available to take appropriate measure.

Thus far the efforts to deal with it have been policy reform oriented, especially a neo-liberal form of ecological modernization, mainly voluntary in nature, which seeks to hold the existing political-economic system in place through a technical fix, emphasizing technological innovation, incrementalism, market incentives, business friendly initiatives, and cost-benefit decision tests. Most of the Paris Agreement reflects this orientation. Because such pragmatic efforts have fallen far short of anything resembling sustainable development, the question rises as to whether we need a radical transformation to avoid global crisis and achieve a more sustainable way of life. This is not a new question; it emerged early on with the rise of the environmental movement. But it was downplayed or ignored as governments took up their reform efforts. Given the limits of these efforts, however, it has become to revisit this question.

It is not an easy question. Fundamentally, climate policy change policy is the “wicked problem” par excellence. From the policy reform perspective we neither have clear definitions nor ready or obvious solutions. On the other hand, the comprehensive transformative orientation raises an overwhelming number of interconnected variables at all level of governance and a general lack of reliable knowledge. It thus takes us into uncharted territories. Whereas policy reform appears to be insufficient for the task ahead, transformative change appears to challenge our capabilities, both intellectual and material. Where does this leave us? Is the inevitable on the way? Are we relegated to waiting for the crisis, when it is perhaps too late? Can we only respond after the crisis has arrived? Or is there another way?

CALL FOR PAPERS

The objective of the panel is to discuss and explore one of the most critical policy questions of our time, climate change policy. Climate change policy is by all measures a wicked problem of the first order that poses a major challenge to both the political and policy communities. Toward this end, the scholarly community can help to facilitate the deliberative search for solutions by sorting out the wicked issues and assumptions that characterize these issues, as described above. In particular, we compare the policy reform and transformative change perspectives. Whereas policy reform appears to be insufficient for the task ahead, transformative change appears to challenge our capabilities, both intellectual and material.

Are we locked into this dichotomy or might we find ways to meaningfully bring them together.

This proposed panel thus seeks papers that seek to sort out this issues and offer political, policy and analytic perspectives on how we might best orient ourselves to this challenge and move ahead.