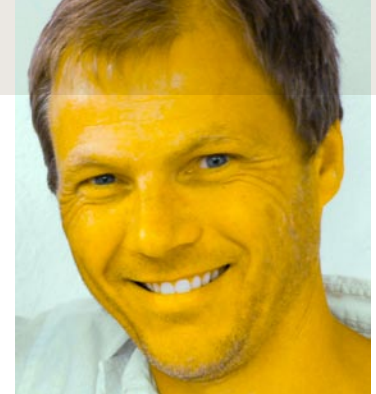


Taking the lead on climate change

An international perspective on the role for governments, businesses and citizens

Steve Colling

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'If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.'

THIS African proverb was cited by Al Gore in a recent lecture. His point was that when it comes to tackling climate change, we need to go far *and* act quickly. The notion of individual and collective action is very much at the heart of this article.

Last year I was invited to join a small UK research team travelling to six countries to interview leaders in government, business and civil society about climate change and energy policy. The study, funded by the Norfolk Charitable Trust, involved interviewing over 60 experts in Bhutan, Brazil, China, Japan, Mexico and the USA.

From an extensive report in 6 different countries, Steve Colling concludes that national self-interest too often stands in the way of the international co-operation and co-ordinated action required for tackling climate change.

How do we decouple growth from climate change?

Let me begin by putting our research in context. Whether we belong to the one billion people living in the so-called developed world, or the five billion living in developing countries, the need for economic growth, and the resulting improvement in quality of life it brings, is seen as essential. Historically, this growth has led to an ever-increasing demand for energy, most of which is derived from fossil fuels, and changes in land-use. Feeding a growing global population hungry for resources and fossil fuel has led us to an increase in atmospheric greenhouse gases (GHG) which is now widely considered unsustainable. The challenge for this generation is how to de-couple growth from environmental damage and runaway climate change.

As countries around the world begin to make the difficult transition towards a carbon-constrained future we see different strategies and solutions emerging. The slow adoption of these and increasing concern about the extent and impact of global climate change is causing many to shout 'too little, too late!' As this concern is well understood and documented, our focus was upon identifying some of the positive enablers of change. Beyond this, we wanted to gather evidence to answer one of the most pressing questions of our time: is the speed, nature and extent of action currently planned and underway across the world realistically likely to bring about stabilisation of the climate? Can global temperature be maintained within the internationally recognised two degree limit?

The Princeton Wedges

Global GHG emissions have largely increased as a result of human activities such as food production, transportation, industry, building and changing land use. All of which are fundamental prerequisites for 'growth' and developing quality of life. They are also large consumers of energy. At a high level, solutions to reducing GHG emissions will lie in finding ways to continue these activities in new, cleaner, less energy-intensive ways. This is best illustrated by the stabilisation wedges model, developed in Princeton University and adopted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The central concept is that there is no single magic bullet solution; but rather, a range of measures which in varying degree will act together to curb GHG emissions. Implicit also is that the most effective combination will vary from one country to another.

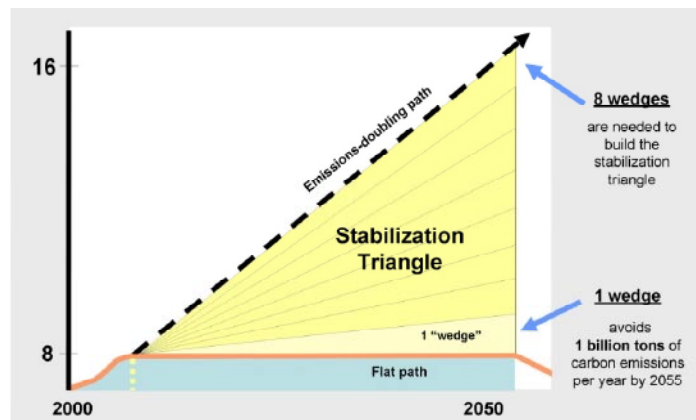


Figure 1:
The Princeton Wedges

‘It is our belief that if people are to become both willing and able to act soon and in a positive way, it must be based upon their philosophical and moral judgements as well as scientific argument. It is emotional engagement that will catalyse action.’

Given the scientists' timescales, many believe we must look within the confines of our prevailing systems and structures to seek solutions. As Jonathon Porritt concludes in his book *Capitalism: As if the World Matters*; the market economy is the 'only show in town'. Or as Ken Green recently observed; 'There is no superman to solve climate change, only supermarkets'. Within this context, although evidence for anthropogenic climate change is almost universally accepted, some of the precise science, solutions and outcomes remain contested. It is our belief that if people are to become both willing and able to act soon and in a positive way, it must be based upon their philosophical and moral judgements as well as scientific argument. It is emotional engagement that will catalyse action. So our research explored beyond the boundaries of policies and technologies; and looked at the nuance of attitude and behaviour change, the role of the media, charismatic leaders and NGOs.

Our hypothesis and approach

We defined this as: 'An 80% reduction in GHG emissions by 2050 is unachievable without clear integration between policy frameworks, employers' needs and individuals' desires'. This relationship is described by the UK Sustainable Consumption Roundtable as the 'triangle of change'; whereby collaborative action is needed to produce lasting change.

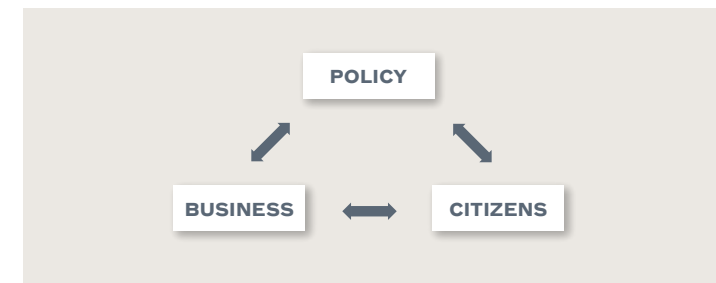


Figure 2:
Triangle of change

We selected the countries based upon a number of potentially influential variables; GHG emissions, economic development, political structures, religious and cultural differences, environmental resources, population size and growth. Within countries we met with policy makers, commercial companies, trade associations and professional bodies, academics, NGOs and journalists. The research was qualitative in nature, gaining an in-depth under-

standing from a limited number of experts. This approach is reflected in our conclusions. No attempt to quantify findings has been made; instead we sought to identify broad themes, patterns and trends.

Conclusions

Let me begin on a positive note. We found plenty of evidence of a wide range of different actions to tackle climate change taking place in developed and developing countries around the world. From micro-hydro electricity generation schemes in Bhutan, to new solar technology developments in California and national climate change strategies in Mexico and China.

As many of these initiatives are still in their infancy it's difficult to judge their potential efficacy. In the final analysis, it will be the ability and willingness of the different players that determines whether these actions will be sufficient to prevent runaway climate change. Within developing countries, ability may be the limiting factor, as any steps that may increase the cost of living today will be difficult to bear where a large proportion of the population remains in poverty. In contrast, in the richer economies, people may have a greater ability to carry additional costs but lack the willingness to change.

You will recall that commercial companies (business) sit on one corner of the 'triangle of change'. Our experience was that no matter how innovative they may consider themselves to be, ultimately market forces will drive their behaviour. The business sector will not spearhead the changes needed without unequivocal direction from government and changing demand from consumers.

On the second corner sit individual citizens. Coming from a democratised country, we've grown up, at least in part, with a bottom-up view of influence. It's the little people that count: the voters, the consumers and the employees; this is where change really happens. But with regard to climate change this influence is unlikely to catalyse significant action. While citizens can vote with their feet, either politically or as consumers, we found little willingness to do so. The desire to hold onto what we have, or aspire to what we consider entitled to, in most cases will prevent spontaneous large-scale shifts in behaviour.

“Is the speed, nature and extent of action currently planned and underway across the world realistically likely to bring about stabilisation of the climate?”

“Across the countries we researched however, we saw little evidence that governments are really prepared to implement the potentially unpopular or unprecedented measures required to achieve the emissions targets.”

That leaves the government's corner. We concluded from the research that it is they that hold the pivotal position as agents of change. Where governments recognise this and choose to act, then there is the potential to achieve the CO₂ reductions necessary. And this may be led at a national, state or local level; driven by one charismatic individual or a broad consensus. Across the countries we researched however, we saw little evidence that governments are really prepared to implement the potentially unpopular or unprecedented measures required to achieve the emissions targets. Changing our light bulbs and shopping locally are important, but it's the big global changes that we really need to focus upon.

The 'triangle of change' is in part a useful model for understanding influence. But seeing it as a simple, equilateral triangle is misleading. The governments' corner needs to be far bigger, and across all three, there needs to be a far greater sense of urgency than we witnessed. At the same time, the triangle doesn't reflect the important role of scientists, academics, and other players, such as NGOs and the media.

Overall, we were not convinced that the people with the power to act are sufficiently motivated to do so. No matter how developed a country, the short-term desire to raise immediate standards of living gets in the way of real change. Even when, in the long term, this change could yield economic benefits. Put simply, national self-interest too often stands in the way of international cooperation and co-ordinated action.

To conclude, across the six countries studied, our qualitative view is that the totality of current and planned actions to tackle climate change are insufficient to meet the 80% target.

For a copy of our report, please email me: steve@onearth.eu.