Where international climate policy has failed, grassroots efforts can succeed: researchers

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Smog in Beijing. Credit: Steven Zhang

The world can significantly slow the pace of climate change with practical efforts to control so-called “short-lived climate pollutants” and by bringing successful Western technologies to the developing world, according to three UC San Diego scientists in the journal *Foreign Affairs*.

For the last two decades global diplomatic talks on climate change have struggled to make progress. Part of the problem, the scientists say, is that diplomacy has focused almost exclusively on carbon dioxide—a pollutant that is expensive and difficult to control.

In the essay “The Climate Threat We Can Beat,” David Victor, political scientist at the School of International Relations and Pacific Studies;

Scripps Institution of Oceanography Director Emeritus Charles Kennel; and Scripps climate and atmospheric scientist Veerabhadran Ramanathan argue that action on short-lived climate pollutants (SLCPs) would have a better chance for success and would generate swifter benefits in the form of less global warming in the near term, as countries attempt to find equitable methods for controlling carbon dioxide. This new strategy would be particularly attractive to the world's major emitters of SLCPs —China, the United States and India—that so far have been reluctant to make big promises to control their emissions of carbon dioxide.

Speaking about the new essay, Victor said "Action on soot and ozone can transform the politics of climate change because controlling these pollutants doesn't just benefit the climate. It also delivers tangible local benefits. Even the governments that are skittish about spending money for global benefits can see real local advantages in this new strategy."

In February, six countries (including the United States) formed a coalition devoted to promote practical changes that could control emissions of global warming agents such as soot and ozone. The essay applauds that effort but argues that it must expand to include China and India.

"Messrs. Victor, Kennel and Ramanathan have written a timely and important article that underscores the crucial and affordable opportunity to reduce short-term warming pollutants, substantially cut the current rate of global warming, increase our chances of avoiding dangerous climate change and save millions of lives," said Todd Stern, United States Special Envoy for Climate Change. "Countries around the world should step up and take action."

The essay appears in the May/June issue of *Foreign Affairs*, which will be released on April 25, the same day that Ramanathan will be the

keynote speaker in a SLCPs meeting and participate in a dialogue of environment ministers from around the world attending the Stockholm+40 conference, which is meant to commemorate the international conference that created the U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) in 1972. Sweden is also part of the new coalition as are Canada, Mexico, Bangladesh and Ghana. UNEP is secretariat of the coalition.

“If the world is to decisively combat climate change, we need all hands on deck. The science of short lived climate pollutants has matured to the point at which there is now the imperative to act,” said UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner.

"The new Coalition for Climate and Clean Air opens a new chapter, marking practical and political engagement. The world needs to act on all greenhouse gases, CO2 especially. But we know today that phasing down and phasing out black carbon, methane and fluorinated gases like HFCs represents a real opportunity with quick wins on health, food security and climate that can unite the developed and developing worlds in common cause," Steiner added.

The piece characterizes what has been termed a “second front” in the global effort to stanch global warming before widespread environmental and societal damage takes place. Relatively simple techniques such as introducing cleaner cooking technologies to rural households in the developing world and preventing leaks in natural gas and methane lines could delay such effects by as much as 30 years. Other realistic changes in everyday life include stopping the use of solid coal for household heating, retrofitting or replacing older power plants and insulating homes to reduce their heating needs.

“The science is already there. The policy is there. So how do we implement it?” said Ramanathan, who will discuss prospects for controlling short-lived climate pollutants at the Stockholm conference.

“It needs a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches.”

The authors and other advocates of this new approach believe its large benefits to public health and agriculture as well as the relative affordability of adoption could garner it broad public support. They note that the Montreal Protocol, which banned the use of chlorofluorocarbons, was widely supported in part because people understood the tangible benefits from protecting against skin cancer and agricultural crop damage that came from it.

The authors cite policy changes that produced significant environmental improvements in locales such as California that could have a far-reaching effect if adopted globally. Use of improved filters in diesel-burning vehicles and reformulated gasoline cut California’s black carbon emissions in half from 1989 to 2007. The state has also been a leader in planning adaptation strategies to climate problems that are likely to be inevitable regardless of mitigation efforts, the authors said.

Victor, Kennel and Ramanathan conclude that the success of these measures could reinvigorate efforts to create international policy to curb carbon dioxide emissions. These remain the chief sources of anthropogenic climate change and have climate effects that last for more than a century.

“We don't have to wait to get started on the climate problem,” said Kennel. “We can work with communities around the world to help them limit their SLCP emissions, as well as prepare them for the unavoidable climate changes ahead.”

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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