

Climate action must now focus on the global rich and their corporations

December 18 2018, by Nicholas Beuret



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

The latest UN climate talks, known as COP24, have just concluded. The supposed story this time was one of a grinding victory by the EU and developing nations over recalcitrant petro-states – Russia, the US,

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. These four, condemned as "[climate villains](#)" over the past week, worked to block the adoption of [a critical IPCC report](#) that detailed how woefully inadequate current international action was for limiting future climate change to 1.5C.

Building on a previous COP in Paris in 2015, this meeting focused on writing the "rulebook" for the [Paris Agreement](#), setting out how emissions will be measured, reported and verified. Absent at COP24 was any real discussion of how efforts to cut emissions would be increased, or targets raised from their current low level. This will be discussed at another meeting – another COP – in 2020.

More magical thinking

You could be forgiven for thinking this COP (short for [Conference Of the Parties](#) to the UN [climate](#) agreements) was no different to any of the previous COPs. As usual, there were a set of villains who were "holding up progress". There was another scientific report spelling out how little time we have and how bad climate change will be if nothing changes. There was rancorous debate on technicalities, a sideshow debate around carbon markets, and no action on what to actually do. So far, so normal. Throughout its history [very little has actually been achieved at the COP](#).

As things stand, we are still heading for [3°C or more of global warming](#). We do not have 12 years to "do something" about it as the IPCC insists. Increasing numbers of commentators, journalists, scientists and environmentalists are breaking ranks from the "[hopeful](#)", to argue that not only is far too little being done too late, but that dangerous climate change is [already here](#).

Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, has consistently criticised IPCC reports for [magical thinking](#), for assuming that at some point in the near future technology will be both

invented and rolled out on a mass scale that will suck carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (so-called negative [emission](#) technologies). At the moment, there are none that are close to being ready to be mass produced. Take these out of the most recent IPCC report and instead of 12 years to stop dangerous climate change we have just three.

Given all this, it could be tempting to blame the state of things on the climate villains – who doesn't want to blame authoritarian or outright fascist government leaders for the world's problems? But the problem isn't bad leaders, but the entire system itself. The reality of climate change is that we need a radically different economic and political system if we are to limit future warming and ensure adaptation is fair and just.



Credit: Markus Spiske from Pexels

Nation-states wont fix climate change

The COP reveals the limits of using nation states as the basis for action. Wedded to geopolitical realities and economic competition, states have not changed their behaviour to match the demands of climate science. In many ways it is unrealistic and naive to demand they do so. After all, they are not, as sometimes imagined, ships under the command of a single captain, able to direct the nation one way or another, but rather, complex assemblages where a huge number of actors and interested parties compete for wealth, power, access and influence.

Let's be clear about what must be demanded of nation states: not some kind of minor adjustment or new zero-cost policy, but the end of economic growth. It would require [legislating for de-growth](#), something that could be considered, after a decade of economic austerity, as electoral suicide.

Legislating for de-growth is the right government policy, but the wrong approach. If the nation state is the wrong climate change actor, then the [national economy](#) is also the wrong perpetrator. Yet this is what every plan to combat climate change focuses on: national emissions. But this focus hides massive inequities within national populations and, more importantly, obscures both who is responsible for carbon emissions and who has the power to arrest them.

It is really important that we – that is, the vast majority of humanity who will or already are suffering the effects of dangerous climate change – move past "national action plans" and start to take action immediately against two groups largely responsible for climate change. They are the

100 or so corporations [responsible for 71% of global carbon emissions](#) and the wealthiest 10% of the global population [responsible for 50% of consumption emissions](#). To put the latter in perspective, if this 10% reduced their consumption to the level of the average European that would produce [a 30% cut in global emissions](#).

Focusing on the wealthy and their corporations would enable us to bring about an immediate cut in carbon emissions. But it would also form part of a [just transition](#), ensuring that the majority of the world's population do not have to pay for climate policy, a conflict we have already seen on the streets of Paris in recent weeks in the [yellow vests movement](#).

As we hurtle into 2019, we need to immediately shift to actions against the ultra-wealthy and the uber-powerful. It is long past time for changing how we talk about climate change. At some point we will need social movements capable of [changing everything](#), but right now we need to relentlessly focus our actions on that small group of people profiting off the destruction of the world, and not wait in vain on governments to do it for us.

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