Paris Climate Accord sans the USA
The Role of Local Governments in Confronting the Effects of Climate Change and Increasing Resilience

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Abstract: President Trump’s decision to withdraw from a multinational climate agreement—commonly known as the Paris Climate Accord—created a tsunami of reactions worldwide. World leaders and business CEOs almost universally decried the decision. The United States’ absence from a leadership position in the fight against the threats and consequences of climate change is a negative development. The need for action is immediate and will need to include all levels of government and private-sector stakeholders. After the US president’s decision to rescind the previous administration’s commitment to the Paris Accord, US cities increased their efforts to address climate change threats. While it may be that these efforts are a result of altruistic desires of the mayors and other elected officials representing their constituents at a local level, cities and communities have a moral and ethical obligation to address concerns and prepare for climate-change-related impacts. This article examines the often-misunderstood nature of the unique relationship between cities, state governments, and the United States federal government. Moreover, the article provides a clear account of how these different entities interact independently and distinctly, facilitating the design of their own responses to climate change threats.

Keywords: Climate Change, Resilience, Paris Climate Agreement, Sustainability, Local Governments

Introduction

President Trump’s decision to withdraw from a multinational climate agreement—commonly known as the Paris Climate Accord—created a tsunami of reactions worldwide. World leaders and business CEOs almost universally decried the decision (Alibašić 2018c; Bendix 2017; McGregor 2017). On August 4, 2017, in an official communication from the US Department of State, the intent to withdraw from the accord was confirmed, with the United States expressing interest in continuing its participation in the ongoing and future international climate change negotiations and summits (US Department of State 2017). The US absence from a leadership position in the struggle against the threats and consequences of climate change is an adverse development. However, an argument could be made that the immediate beneficiaries of the US administration removing itself from the Paris Climate Accord are the nations that remained in the Paris Climate Accord and the planet itself. By removing himself and his administration from the Accord, the US president has made it easier for the rest of the world.

President Trump’s attempts at grandstanding and renegotiating existing agreements would otherwise harm the worldwide efforts to mitigate the results of the dramatic and immediate threats from climate change. The non-participation of the US federal government in the Paris Climate Accord has the potential of strengthening the accord by removing an opposing and possibly obstructive voice. However, more challenging for the Paris Climate Accord would have been the outright hostility of the current administration toward the scientifically proven notion that human-engendered pollution is a leading cause of the worldwide phenomenon known as global warming and that climatic changes occur as a result. Edward Scott Pruitt, who until recently served as the fourteenth EPA administrator, complained that it was not the right time to talk about the climate change considering the devastating impacts of Hurricanes Harvey and Irma on Texas and Florida, respectively. Given the increasing evidence of connections between the

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intensity of hurricanes and the climate change, observed by Mann, Peterson, and Hassol (2017), the conversation is not only timely but also of the utmost urgency.

Local governments and communities face and will continue to meet the brunt of these extreme weather events, which are further exacerbated by the warming oceans, increased global temperatures, and unpredictability of weather patterns, among many other issues. The current administration’s regressive policies on environmental and climate change issues will have long-lasting effects on local governments. By incorporating climate change data into their sustainability plans, strategic plans, and emergency action guidelines, cities can better withstand negative impacts from extreme weather events and climate change. This article explains the prospective roles US cities and the federal government have in taking action to mitigate and to adapt to climate change. The notion of an existing conceptual model allowing separate US government entities to prepare for and address climate change is described in the proceeding pages.

The Undisputed Impact of Climate Change

Extensive scientific studies demonstrate that human activities are the primary cause of climate change and that the consequences of climate change on the quality of life, environment, and societies are significant. Rising global temperatures, increased sea levels, more extreme weather, and changes in weather patterns generate severe impacts on economic aspects of life from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, biodiversity, and energy and water use and are well-documented, analyzed, debated, and researched (Fletcher 2013; IPCC 2014; Karl et al. 2009; Mach et al. 2016; Malcolm et al. 2006; Pecl et al. 2017; Segan et al. 2015; Stott et al. 2016; Urban 2015; Visser et al. 2014). Furthermore, Silva et al. (2013) and Dong et al. (2014) provided the evidence of the link to changes in air pollutant emission and an increase in mortality rates resulting from human activities and further linked it to the impact of the climate change.

While there is a significant consensus on the causes and consequences of the climate change, a small minority of climate change deniers and doubters are decelerating the efforts to address and deal with climate change adequately. The climate change naysayers are financed through various industries interested in deaccelerating the de-investments from traditional sources of energy, such as coal, oil, and natural gas. The climate change deniers are causing delays, obstacles, and interruptions to taking decisive actions to address climate change threats at every possible front. Coupled with the slowness of reactions to and the failure of the global community to come to precise and definitive action plans, the concerns over the future of the planet should be out front in every corner of the world. Additionally, the idea of addressing climate change falls under the moral and ethical obligations of organizations and individuals. As dire consequences are forecasted, most of those impacted by potential climate change and extreme weather-related events would be low-income and the most vulnerable population. As such, cities that are going to have to deal with these negative impacts and will bear the brunt of costs.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of the Paris Climate Accord

The Paris Climate Accord is far from perfect or ideal; however, it offers an opportunity for states to work together or attempt to reconcile their differences on the issues of the planet itself and the impact we humans have on our only available home. The difficulty of negotiating and navigating the Paris Climate Accord itself is well documented in Dimitrov (2016), Andresen (2015), and UNFCCC (2015). Paying for the implementation of such plans is even more burdensome and difficult to navigate as countries deflect the financial commitments of dealing with climate adaptation and mitigation to future generations. In their research, Anderson, Bernauer, and Baliotti (2017) provide some insight into dynamic behind paying for climate-change-related efforts. The US contribution to the global greenhouse gas (GHG) emission is immense and accounts for almost 14.36 percent of the world’s emissions (Friedrich, Ge, and Pickens 2017).
Paying for the implementation of such plans is even more burdensome and difficult to navigate. The validation of the importance of the accord is that only two countries in the world are not signatories to the agreement, with one of them being the United States. A cynical view would be the idea of self-implementation of self-imposed elements of GHG emission reductions to meet the temperature reduction target.

**The Diminishing Role of the EPA in Addressing Climate Risks**

A far more concerning issue with a potential long-lasting damaging impact is the current administration’s hostility toward scientific evidence of climatic changes and environmental protections, demonstrated in daily activities aimed at undercutting and undervaluing the federal policies to enforce environmental rules. In addition to the withdrawal from the Paris Accord and abdication of the US leadership in this global synchronous fight, the current administration’s insidious attack on environmental regulations and sound science is disconcerting and troubling. The EPA rules are intended to protect the most vulnerable members of the population. In addition to President Trump’s executive order to withdraw from the Accord, the current EPA administrator has dismantled years of environmental protection across the board, including challenging the Clean Power Rule and scrubbing any references to climate change information from the White House and federal agencies websites (EPA 2017a). The extensive rules and regulations which have been rolled back by the EPA will bring about lasting damage to the environment (Davenport 2017), unfurling the decades of work to put into place protections from GHG emissions. The immediate impact of environmental damage is usually observed in the most vulnerable, low-income communities. Thurow (1984, 223) remarked how “many environmental regulations are in fact expressions of social preferences that seek to alter contrary individual preferences.” Under the current US administration, a minority-led, shortsighted business lobby prevails over all other interests.

**Local Action on Climate Change: The Past, The Present, and The Future**

In the past when the federal government’s actions on climate change issues were either lacking or non-existent, local and some state governments stepped in to fill in the void. In 2005, the US Conference of Mayors Climate Protection Agreement was established with an aim to support actions to mitigate the impacts of climate change in US cities. Over time, the number of mayors who signed the agreement to address climate change grew to more than 1,000 participants (USCM 2005). This collaboration led to an increased commitment and leadership of US cities in the absence of federal government actions to uphold and support the Kyoto Protocol under President Bush. It was no surprise to see cities, through mayors, city councils, and appointed officials, declaring their intentions to help the climate accord signed in Paris by almost all but (now) three countries in the world. A thorough review of the actual implemented and reduced volume of emissions is warranted as debate continues the relevance and the significance of these commitments. In the United States, cities and states can opt to adopt a contrary position on policy issues as that of the President in the White House. However, in many countries around the world where democratic governance is in the early stages of development, subnational levels of governments are less likely to adopt a contrarian position to that of the president or the party in power.

The need for action is immediate and will need to include all levels of government and private-sector stakeholders. Under President Obama, local and state leaders had a place and role to play in addressing climate change, working directly with the White House staff. In 2013, by Executive Order 136531, Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change, President Obama established The State, Local, and Tribal Leaders Task Force on Climate Preparedness and Resilience (Task Force 2014). The Task Force was asked to make recommendations related to the role of federal government, how the federal government can
support local and state efforts to make communities more resilient, and how it could be more supportive in addressing climate change. Also, members of the Task Force involved in climate preparedness and resilience reached out to thousands of government and planning agencies, academic institutions, and other stakeholders for recommendations, focusing on opportunities to build climate preparedness and resilience (Task Force 2014). All those efforts and proposals are being rolled back under the assault from the current administration.

Despite the lack of federal action on climate change and the administration’s adversarial position on climate science, local and state governments continue to pursue climate preparedness and resilience strategies. As observed by Gordon (2016), cities have undertaken a myriad of actions in addressing the climate-change-related threats. The scaling of the climate resilience efforts to local government levels is underscored in the ability to measure outcomes from those activities. Many initiatives by local governments, and in some states in the US are aimed at reducing GHG emissions, mitigating the impact of climate change, or adapting to new climate realities. Some of the examples of cutting-edge approaches to climate resilience include cities and counties from the East to the West Coast; from the northern to the southern parts of the United States; from Los Angeles, Boston, Portland, Broward County, Miami-Dade County, New York City, and Chicago to Grand Rapids, MI. For example, in 2013, Grand Rapids developed a multi-stakeholder, long-term resiliency report to coincide with the city’s master planning effort (Alibašić 2017). The city partnered with regional environmental group West Michigan Environmental Action Council and the local university to utilize climate data and predict climate-change-related trends that need to be addressed (Alibašić 2018a). Far-reaching sustainability and resilience recommendations were then incorporated into the city’s five-year sustainability plan (Alibašić 2017, 2018e).

The 100 Chief Resilience Officers is another effort to build infrastructure to plan for climate change, through climate resilience policies and programs. By allowing communities to employ a full staff person dedicated to climate resilience, more cohesive efforts are being deployed at subnational levels, allowing a community-based initiative to take hold. Fiscal constraints and the impact of a global economy on local governance and the ability to deliver outcomes may be viewed as significant disruptions. Local governments engaged in climate preparedness and resilience efforts can adapt and transform and accept discontinuities as they continue to offer services without interruptions. In a crisis, community resilience-related efforts become an opportunity and a tool for local governments, as they then need to change their priorities, emergency management, and outcomes of the budget process (Alibašić 2018b, 2018d).

The 100 percent renewable energy targets are intended to enable cities to mitigate and reduce impacts from energy consumption in city operations by switching energy demand to greener energy. Measurements of the reduction of the GHG emissions as a result of the renewable energy production and procurement by cities is relevant as an ongoing debate evaluates the importance and impact of local government’s actions to reduce the GHG emissions. Recently, 364 US mayors agreed to cut GHG emissions per Paris Climate Accord requirements (Climate Mayors 2017). Also, more than 250 Mayors, and subsequently city councils/city commissions adopted the 100 percent renewable energy targets, while the EPA Top 30 lists are regularly updated, showing significant renewable energy commitments from cities to Fortune 500 companies (USCM 2017; EPA 2017b). Only by joint efforts of the public and private sector can the US reverse the negative impact of the current administration’s regressive policies on environmental and climate change issues. These efforts within and outside organizations engaged in climate resilience and preparedness are necessary to prepare for the next record-breaking natural disaster that will inevitably occur. The need for action is immediate and will need to include all levels of government, and the private sector stakeholders. Constituents at a local level, cities and communities will expect their appointed and elected officials to meet their moral and ethical obligation to address concerns and prepare for the climate-change-related impacts.
As cities take a more active role in addressing climate change, there is a shift in the dynamic of fiscal federalism, a reinvention of the local zoning and land use ordinances, and the way local governments procure and produce energy. In addition to taking a proactive leadership role, cities are less dependent on federal and state funding and draw from the shared experience of cities around the world, leading to better governance of local resources and more globally minded citizenry in cities. Environmental, economic, and social issues through the climate change lens are no longer viewed as localized issues. Cities will continue to pursue resilience policies, perhaps best described through the combination of sustainability-related efforts copulated with the impacts of climate change and weather events as the combination of resistance and survival strategies.

REFERENCES


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