How well is the UN’s approach to climate change working?

Scientists in the UK have carried out a preliminary evaluation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to assess how effective it has been at stimulating sustainable development and a reduction in carbon emissions. Their key conclusions were that, although very important, the convention alone is not enough to drive change within every signature nation, and that more action is needed at the local level.

The UNFCCC set out the framework for intergovernmental efforts to tackle the challenge posed by climate change. So far 189 countries have agreed to the convention. Along with its Kyoto Protocol, it forms the principal set of rules and regulations to ensure an international effort against climate change. This study is the first to review how well the convention is working, and if it is stimulating real change. The convention has been in force since 1994.

The researchers interviewed participants at the 8th UNFCCC conference of parties in 2002. They interviewed 29 ‘state and non-state’ actors, who represented governments, businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). They focused on two main areas: the effect of the convention on national responses to climate change and the drivers and triggers of climate change responses within each of the countries.

All of the participants interviewed agreed that climate change was a high-profile and important issue for their respective governments. The researchers concluded that, together with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the scientific body set up to assess all of the data on the risks of climate change, the UNFCCC has provided an influential driving force for policy change.

The convention has also been effective in encouraging major businesses to respond, as economic and environmental policies influence their practices. New economic opportunities, such as the establishment of carbon credits and the international carbon market, have also stimulated change.

However, individual countries and their differing social and economic circumstances cannot all be addressed centrally, at the international level. The convention is unable to affect changes in behaviour within different states, which appears to be one of its key limitations.

The attitudes and driving forces within different countries vary widely. In Western Europe, there is a major focus on communication of climate change issues to the public, and countries currently experiencing weather stresses due to climate change already consider it a major threat. However, where poverty is widespread, for example in some African states, people may simply be unable to make the choice to change their lifestyle. As well as emphasising the need to find low-cost solutions, the authors of the study suggest that regional-level networks are needed to engage such communities.

Similarly, small and medium-sized businesses are not inclined to be influenced by the convention. Small companies not operating over international borders may not benefit from becoming involved in Kyoto Protocol mechanisms.


Contact: emma.tompkins@ouce.ox.ac.uk

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