



# Climate change as a ‘wicked problem’

by Gerald Stang and Balazs Ujvari

Wicked problems are just that. They are multidimensional challenges that are difficult to resolve due to incomplete or contradictory information, differing views on the nature of the problem, or complex interactions with other issues. Wicked problems often blend into other issues and only become visible when their serious effects are felt. One such problem is climate change: a long-term issue for which the urgency of immediate action is increasingly evident. Long labelled a wicked problem, efforts to cut back on the greenhouse gas emissions which cause climate change have been slow, uneven, and politically divisive.

Though parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have repeatedly failed to agree and follow up on a robust deal, hopes have been growing that the upcoming 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) in Paris might deliver. Rounds of talks have taken place this year to develop a common text to be finalised and adopted in Paris, while climate action plans (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions – INDCs) have been submitted by nearly every country. Unfortunately, opinions still differ over some of the key pillars of the draft Paris text, and the collective impact of the INDCs – should they be implemented as outlined – is expected to be insufficient to keep global warming to less than 2°C by the end of the century.

And with political agendas always crowded, long-term issues like climate change can be easily

shunted down on the domestic agendas of negotiating states. At this year’s G20 summit in Turkey, the official economic agenda and its minor climate component were overshadowed by the Paris attacks, the Syrian war, the refugee crisis, disputes with Russia and ongoing tensions in the South China Sea. Given the challenges facing a country like G20 host Turkey, how much importance will be given to climate change?

## No solutions yet, but...

Decades of work have gone into figuring out how to prioritise and move forward on climate issues. The nature of climate talks has constantly evolved as engaged parties learned how to frame the climate challenge in ways that make sense to political leaders and policymakers. As a result of this creative thinking, the *modus operandi* of international climate diplomacy has changed. Below are five elements being incorporated into climate negotiations that may also be relevant when approaching other global wicked problems.

*Pragmatism* – From the outset, COP15 was still dominated by the thinking that led to the Kyoto Protocol, with its emphasis on legally binding emission cuts. But the final outcome (the 2009 Copenhagen Accord), brokered by those countries with a preference for voluntary commitments, heralded the end of Kyoto-style bargaining. Moving from Copenhagen to Paris, the focus of climate discussions has shifted from binding

limits to voluntary contributions. While this raises serious questions about sufficient ambition and fair distribution of efforts, such a bottom-up approach keeps the process alive – and countries from Turkey to China at the table.

*Engagement* – In the run-up to COP15, efforts to overcome the obvious divergence of views between advanced emerging countries (Brazil, China, India, South Africa – BASICs) and the EU proved inadequate. As the BASICs have successfully maintained unity on climate issues, this group has become central to the viability of the UNFCCC, with each of these countries becoming a focal point of European climate diplomacy post-COP15. The EU and its member states have increasingly worked together to engage with the BASICs and other leading states, seeking to foresee, leverage, modify or accommodate their stances on climate negotiations. This work, complemented by the EU's early and ambitious declaration of its INDC, may also have served as a catalyst for other partners to follow suit. All this has been complemented by initiatives such as the 'Green Diplomacy Network' of European environment and climate change experts.

*Multiplicity* – Climate diplomacy in 2009 primarily meant gathering the international community within the UNFCCC framework, hoping that this forum will suffice to iron out key differences. Less was done bilaterally between key emitters, or in other multilateral fora such as the G8+5 process (which included all the BASICs) or the Major Economies Forum for Climate and Energy (MEF). The MEF gathers the biggest emitters – developed or developing – on equal footing, unrestrained by UNFCCC-like principles on common but differentiated responsibilities. Before COP21, however, a more intense pursuit of climate action in bilateral discussions (e.g. the US with China) and multilateral fora (e.g. G20) has proved crucial in maintaining forward progress and keeping the issue on partner country agendas.

*Compartmentalisation* – Though widely criticised for failing to find consensus on binding emission limits, the Copenhagen Accord did bring parties together on issues such as the recognition of the 2°C limit for global warming this century and climate finance mobilisation targets (\$30 billion for 2010-2012 and \$100 billion per year by 2020). At COP19 in Warsaw, parties made progress on deforestation, loss and damage mechanisms, and the provision of expertise to help the most vulnerable, despite major disagreements over other dossiers. As these examples show, some segregation of discussion topics, even artificial and

temporary, can prevent the most divisive issues from blocking progress elsewhere. This can help overcome deadlocks between opposing blocs, as in the case of the US-China agreement on differentiated responsibilities. COP21 builds on this compartmentalisation with proceeding work on mitigation, adaptation, capacity building, transparency and other areas.

*Incentives* – Many developing countries saw the climate talks at COP15 as imbalanced: driven by Western priorities to cut emissions and change energy systems without sufficient support for managing the subsequent costs. Since COP15, increasing awareness of the climate challenge has changed perspectives in many countries, creating the opportunity for a different mix of tools to be successful. Industrialised countries have made headway in balancing their approach, serving as a model by taking domestic action, applying increasing diplomatic pressure for governments to make substantial commitments, and becoming more concrete in their offers of climate finance, technology and expertise.

## A long and winding road

The application of these five elements cannot directly lead to the resolution of any wicked problem, but it is a recipe for planning actions, avoiding stalemates, and facilitating new cycles of reassessment. And for Europeans, pursuing pragmatism, flexibility and engagement with those holding very different views need not amount to abandonment of the core values which define them. While the route toward them can be winding, the resolution of a wicked problem like climate change requires continued focus on the ultimate goals.

Future EU leadership on climate diplomacy will hinge on the adoption of ambitious positions and presenting them effectively on the international stage. Thus, these wicked problem concepts can also be valuable for shaping where and how EU-level action complements member state engagement, integrating efforts to match the transnational nature of the problem.

What is needed is not a single EU actor speaking on behalf of the bloc, but consistency in the messages that Europeans deliver. Having many Europeans in the room is not a problem as long as they sing from the same hymn sheet.

***Gerald Stang is a Senior Associate Analyst and Balazs Ujvari a Junior Analyst at the EUISS.***

