

## **Local Climate Solutions: Big Enough to Matter and Small Enough to Mangle**

**By Andy Barnett**

We know that people suffer, ecosystems wither, and societies decay in the face of climate change, yet the problem worsens. These consequences of climate change have already begun and they will worsen unless we act with fortitude, agility, and wisdom.

Despite efforts to conserve energy, pass legislation, and secure a global deal, climate pollution increased 70% between 1970 and 2004, and we spent \$38 billion dollars on a global climate program that has failed its stated goal<sup>i</sup>. And the science could not be more clear: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has called warming of the climate system “unequivocal.”<sup>ii</sup> How is it that such a strong scientific consensus could be met with such tepid global action?

The policy problem here is that humanity’s response to climate change delivers rising emissions and weak global agreements. The policy problem is, in other words, that our policies fail to solve the problem.

This trend data calls citizens to invent alternatives with a new goal: mitigate and adapt to the harmful impacts of climate change, and build a process that meaningfully engages world citizens. While United Nations (UN) talks rightfully

continue, we would be foolish to bet the planetary ranch on a horse that hasn't learned to walk yet. Surely we can do more than write to our leaders, asking them to "Do something, please."

As an environmental problem solver, earth citizen, and ordained leader in the Episcopal Church, I hope to discover what, if anything, I might do to contribute to local and global climate solutions.

In my research, I consider climate change as a biophysical problem, as a social process problem, and as a decision process problem. I conclude that ultimately, climate change is an ethical problem that requires more of our political, economic, and social institutions than we have yet realized. We are failing the greatest challenge facing humanity, and it is our Great Work to address climate change head on.

Adaptive Governance provides an opportunity to synchronize local climate solutions that are big enough to matter and small enough to manage. It is described as "an opportunity for field-testing in series and in parallel thousand of policies for adapting to those climate changes we cannot avoid, and for mitigating those we can."<sup>iii</sup> Mobilizing pockets of political will, Adaptive Governance catalyzes climate solutions that make sense in specific places, at certain times. This approach cracks

open a window of opportunity because regional projects, like parks, pair local cost with local benefit. Consequently, they tunnel through political barriers and actually happen. Policy makers at all levels can then harvest experience and replicate success while terminating failure. Local actions make climate solutions tangible on the neighborhood scale, and they have the potential to move citizens from apathy to action. Overcoming this cultural and ethical failure remains a central task in the fight against climate change.

So what does Adaptive Governance look like? It's communities coming together to cut pollution, save money, improve the neighborhood, and model low-carbon prosperity. It's solar panels on churches, energy audits all over town, efficient boilers, better windows and doors, local farms, biking, walking, and carpooling. As part of my research, I interviewed people who were implementing these solutions across the country. For example, I learned from the Urban Resources Initiative as they plant 10,000 trees in New Haven. The trees sequester carbon, shade the city, improve property value, reduce crime, and absorb the smoke that would have caused smog. And URI builds partnerships all over town so that low-income and minority communities have just as much input as Yale. This project is big enough to matter because they can tell you the pounds of pollution they've prevented, AND they can tell you countless stories of people who ventured outside to plant a tree, and later fell in love with their local parks and wildlife. There is a physical

environmental benefit, and the beginning of a cultural transformation, and they both matter.

In my project, I analyzed the climate policy problem, investigate Adaptive Governance as an alternative, and justify local climate solutions from an ethical perspective. This work stretches beyond the head and reaches deep into the heart. So often we see environmental issues framed as political disputes or economic tussles. Some will oppose clean energy on partisan grounds, while others will ask whether it is cost efficient to prevent suffering and death. But these are moral concerns that bore to the core of our humanity.

I ask: *what, if anything, can we do about climate change, and why act now?*

The central finding is that global warming requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. Accordingly, I recommend that governments seek an aggressive global climate deal that stabilizes atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> at safe levels (currently thought to be 350 to 450 parts per million.)<sup>iv</sup> I recommend that nations pursue bold climate policies, and I recommend that local communities engage no-regrets mitigation projects that reduce emissions and improve human wellbeing. We can only do what we can, with what we have, where we are. But we all must do at least that much, because

we are called to love neighbor as self. In our time, we can only love our global neighbors with just societies and a stable climate.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> **Pachauri, R.K.** "Address to the UN General Assembly." United Nations Headquarters, New York. September 22, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> **Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.** *Fourth Assessment Report.* Geneva Switzerland. 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> **Brunner, Ronald D.,** and Amanda H. Lynch. *Adaptive Governance and Climate Change.* American Meteorological Society, Boston Massachusetts, 2010. Page viii.

<sup>iv</sup> **Hansen, James,** et al. Target Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>: Where Should Humanity Aim? Submitted April 7, 2008.