

Chapter 31

Democracy and participation

Achim Steiner



Achim Steiner, a German national, was born in Brazil in 1961. During his studies at the Universities of Oxford and London, he specialized in development economics, regional planning, international development, and environment policy. In 2001 he was appointed Director General of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In 2006 the UN General Assembly elected Steiner as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme for a four-year term. He is also serving on a number of international development advisory boards.

Note: This chapter is a commentary on chapter 29.

John Sulston has compared the challenge posed by climate change to a repeated version of the 'prisoners' dilemma', in which the prisoners have the opportunity to increase trust by seeing how each responded in prior rounds of the game. His conclusion is that we need to increase information flow in order to build trust and hence prevent defection, in this case from collective agreements to reduce emission of greenhouse gases. I agree with Sulston's conclusion, but would go further and say that we also need to increase the flow of *knowledge* stemming from wider sharing of that information.

Sharing information on climate change and helping each other to truly understand and trust in the necessary actions necessitates close cooperation among all players of 'the game'. Such cooperation is essential if we are to avoid the future that scientists warn will be our fate if we fail to act. It is worthwhile taking a closer look at the capability of democratic institutions to foster cooperation in times of crisis. Cooperation is, paradoxically, both made more complicated and easier by democratic, more participatory forms of government because they place a high value on the individual and fundamental human rights

On the one hand, the spread of democratic governments and greater control by more individuals over decisions that affect their lives is one of the great achievements of the late twentieth century. The Nobel laureate Amartya Sen characterized *development as freedom* in his 1999 book of the same name. He also noted that in order to develop we must account for the 'worsening threats to our environment and to the sustainability of our economic and social lives'. Democracy promotes the flow of information, helping to create the informed and engaged citizenry that is needed to tackle collective challenges such as climate change. Democratic development and the strengthening of institutions that safeguard individual human rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which last year celebrated its sixtieth birthday. They also form the core of the United Nations system, and shape our everyday work at the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). It must be our collective hope that development processes will continue to bring freedom and inclusion to more people.

On the other hand, by giving more people a role in decision making, democracy can make it difficult to reach a consensus. The prisoners' dilemma grows more complicated when there are many prisoners and fewer opportunities to see firsthand the benefits of cooperation, a point Sulston makes in noting that trust comes more easily to small tight-knit groups than it does at the global scale. This does not imply a world in which a benevolent autocracy is the basis for reaching decisions – not only in relation to climate change – for the good of all, but rather means that, in Professor Sulston's words, 'an enormously important task is to inform and persuade citizens everywhere of the need for strategic change'. The challenge in a democracy is to ensure that citizens are informed and educated enough to be able to understand

the issues at stake, and empowered to act accordingly even when the benefits of a choice may seem remote. This is a huge challenge in an information age that so often seems characterized by a glut of information, much of which can appear contradictory, self-serving, or just plain wrong. There is as yet no good equivalent in popular journalism to the peer review and vetting processes that, as Sulston observes, help weed out bad science. The result is that disinformation about climate change being a hoax continues to circulate in the media and public discourse, and time and energy is wasted debating whether observed climate phenomena are actually natural variations of yet undiscovered natural cycles; this time and energy could be better spent finding solutions to climate change.

We urgently need better ways of validating complex science, and communicating its inherent uncertainties to the public. People must be able to understand not only the magnitude of the problem but also the benefits of acting to curb emissions or taking steps to adapt to coming changes, even if this means making short-term sacrifices for the long-term common good. In democratic societies, the willingness to support actions for the collective good is communicated through the ballot box to those responsible for negotiating international agreements, making public policy, and enacting laws and regulations. The ballot box is a great achievement of democratic societies, but also a challenge to society if citizens base their vote on misinformation.

In addressing the problem of climate change it is important to get beyond merely communicating the issues. Communication needs to be accompanied by the development of new, and the reinforcement of existing, mechanisms that foster the inclusion and participation of wider and more informed constituencies in the policy-making process. Such mechanisms are essential to provide the 'basis for participation' that Sulston is hoping for. They are also essential in increasing the flow of knowledge and understanding stemming from the wider sharing of information that I see as a crucial extension of Sulston's argument.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have a particularly valuable role to play here, and not only because they provide, as Sulston points out, a balance to powerful vested interests that attempt to influence governments. The best NGOs are very good at communicating information, encouraging participation, and rallying public support for change. A strong and vibrant NGO community is usually evidence of a democratic and open society. However, NGOs are also important in another way. What we might call 'fact building' for policy is less the result of a pure, rational quest for what is technically correct, and more about the establishment of facts within networks. This is a characteristic that NGOs share with scientists and other knowledge-based communities, groups Peter Haas has defined as 'networks of knowledge-based experts or groups with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within the domain of their expertise'. The reach and

influence of such networks and their stability vis-à-vis mainstream institutions, both at the national and international levels, help generate the political will needed to ensure that appropriate responses to climate change are adopted, initially nationally and eventually internationally.

Recognising the importance of NGOs and other non-state actors in shaping and communicating opinion, UNEP set up its Major Groups and Stakeholders Branch to enhance participation of civil society in our work. We value the perspectives that groups as diverse as trade unions, local authorities, indigenous people, youth, and the scientific and technological community bring to the table; the valuable research and advocacy functions they perform, and their role in helping foster long-term, broad-based support for UNEP's mission. These partners help us implement our work programme in a number of ways. They adapt our global efforts to national or local realities and form a valuable liaison function between UNEP and local communities. Major Groups provide the scientific, policy and legal expertise necessary for effective implementation, and act as watchdogs, helping foster accountability in governments. Our public awareness and outreach efforts rely to a large extent on partnerships with Major Groups, who are particularly effective in engaging the general public in an informative and educative manner. In the area of adaptation to climate change, for example, we are supporting efforts in a number of African countries to introduce strategies for coping with climate variability to farmers and other rural groups. In almost all cases governments have chosen to work with local NGOs in communicating this information.

Sulston is somewhat critical of the UN's ability to resist being manipulated by what he calls 'well-endowed vested interests'. It is not so much that the UN is manipulated; but when member states differ on important points, achieving agreement on a course of action is often difficult. National interests still matter a great deal, and in a consensus-based body such as the UN it can appear to the casual observer that discussion takes precedence over action. But this only highlights the importance of improving information flow so that governments clearly understand the long-term consequences of their positions and do not base these on short-term, narrow determinations. I agree with Sulston that as part of the global agenda we need to build on the success of the UN and improve trust in the capacity of the multi-lateral system to facilitate equitable and fair outcomes, although I would not defer this to the long term as he does.

Hence, with respect to climate change, we must aim not only to increase the flow of scientifically correct information, but also to foster understanding and application of the received information, thus enhancing responsible action by a larger constituency. Such development requires trust and close cooperation among a large number of different players, which is best achieved through focused actions with clearly defined goals. In this context, it may be worth referring to Sulston's call for

a regime in which the private acquisition of intellectual property should be minimized, and funding on climate change conducted in a manner that promotes open-access publication of research findings. Providing an example from the area of public health, Sulston points out that the most successful new initiatives are being undertaken by public-private partnerships supported by charitable and government funds, and he sees scope for this model in the area of climate change mitigation. This idea is certainly worth exploring.

One reason, perhaps, for optimism regarding efforts to develop anti-malarial drugs or vaccines for diseases that disproportionately affect people in developing countries is their narrow focus. Such efforts do not aim at developing universal health care for all people but have a singularity of purpose that fosters trust by keeping the number of participants or players small and the result focused. In such a setting, confidence-building measures are more likely to be successful and to lead to mutually beneficial outcomes.

Extended to climate change, the implication is that it may well be wise to concentrate initially on a few important and achievable collective goals, such as improving the efficiency and lowering the cost of solar cells as a low-carbon energy technology. Scientific breakthroughs in this area could help build a consensus for collective action as lower-cost renewable energy technologies help reduce emissions in developed countries while allowing expanded access to energy in developing countries. Success in this one area of collective endeavour, for example, would build confidence and momentum for other cooperative challenges.

In the negotiations on a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, discussions on technology issues have matured, and there is a growing recognition that it is necessary to strike a balance between public and private interest. There are a number of means to achieve this. Two examples are increased government support for research and development of low-carbon and adaptation technologies, and support by developed countries for so-called enabling measures in developing countries, which help create the necessary markets. Hopefully, by tackling only one or a few problems at a time, we will be more successful in communicating the urgency of climate change and stimulating effective action to deal with it.