Little Fires Everywhere: California's Climate Parable

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The thick acrid smoke of climate change is making a stop in every country, leaving behind a trail of death, disease, and destruction. With the human and economic cost of the blazes in Australia and Brazil still being assessed, California joins an unenviable list of locales ravaged by climate aided wildfires in the last twelve months. Simultaneously, though often surreptitiously, thousands of climate hazards continue to devastate rich and poor communities around the world.

In many ways, Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* provides a fitting insight into California's raging fire and the way climate and environmental degradation are colliding. In the screen adaptation of the novel, the conflagration that consumes the home of the Richardsons' is the aftermath of 'little fires' started by three children in different parts of the residence. It provides a metaphor for the pockets of dysfunction that could ultimately aggregate to consume the

planet we call home.

Warmer climate, bigger fires

California's wildfires are a result of a rapidly deteriorating global biosystem. What should ordinarily be a slam-dunk case for climate action has generated distracting but compelling narratives that mix half-truths and untruths to stoke opposition to climate attribution. The American President attributed the cause of the wildfires wholly to poor forest management, while others argue that they are evidence of the ineffectiveness of California's relatively aggressive mitigation initiatives—especially since wildfires have resulted in multiple days of blackouts.

These risky attempts to undermine science continue to gain prominence at the highest levels of government, despite compelling scientific evidence attributing the frequency and severity of wildfires to changes in the global climate. Climate change made the conditions for Australia's 2019-2020 wildfire thirty per cent more likely, according to an attribution study, and has doubled autumn days with weather conditions for wildfires in California since 1980. Except for the 56.7^{o}C record set in the Death Valley in 1913, California has experienced recent record highs of 54.4^{o}C & 49.4^{o}C in August and September 2020 respectively. As a result, eight of the ten largest and most intense fires in California have burned between 2010 – 2020, and current wildfires are, cumulatively, the largest in the State's history, claiming 26 lives and more than 6000 structures so far.

We draw basic but often neglected lessons from California's experience. If heeded, they could help frame the climate change discourse more persuasively and effectively.

The Centrality of global efforts

By the standards of many countries and sub-national governments, California qualifies as a climate leader. But being a 'good' egg in a basket of 'bad' eggs does not insulate against nature's fury. Under its 2016 Global Warming Solutions Act, the State commits to reducing its emissions by forty percent by 2030 relative to 1990 levels. Comparatively, Canada commits to reducing its

emissions by thirty percent by 2030, compared to 2005 levels. California's cap and trade initiative is the foremost in North America, its emissions standards are stringent, and its renewable energy transition program is aggressive. This bouquet of mitigation policies contains some of the most touted initiatives to mitigate climate change. And there are results.

In the true tradition of environmental practices, California has thought globally, and acted locally. This cliché, is, however, inapt in the climate context where we must think globally and act globally. Arguing similarly, Wiener notes that " 'think globally, act locally' is not such good advice for protecting global public goods when the externalities arise from widespread and geographically moveable sources". To escape the seeming failure partly informed by the top-down approach of the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement gave more preference to the local, with the idea of Nationally Determined Contributions being one of its stand-out innovations. It leaves more global-action oriented provisions in the Agreement (e.g. Art. 6 on Internationally Transferred Mitigation Outcomes) voluntary or heavily qualified. This does not reflect the essentially global nature of climate change. Mitigation is not merely a 'commercial' item to be subject to regular rules of the neoliberal market; it is an existential imperative which mandates global cooperation. While the local is indispensable, it is only relevant to the extent it is part of a concerted global strategy. The inaction of the American federal government, Canada's inadequate commitments and policies, Australia's climate intransigence, China's increasing emissions, and the potential increase in emissions in developing countries would continually imperil California, regardless its mitigation initiatives. Climate action must, necessarily, be framed and implemented at a global level.

California must leverage its position as an innovation hub and the world's fifth-largest economy to drive climate action at a more global level.

Climate change is not an 'Island'

There is a tendency to conflate climate action and sustainability in a manner that obscures their fundamental differences. Appreciating that climate change is best engaged within the broader context of sustainability is one of the most

underwhelmingly accepted climate truisms. A mitigation initiative is not positive only because it reduces emissions. It is only deserving of a pass-mark considering its contribution to sustainability.

Photovoltaic solar could mitigate climate change but could constitute a sustainability nuisance. Hydroelectricity dams might help reduce emissions but could lead to the destruction of ecosystems. And although a properly executed controlled burning of forested land would generate emissions, it could help protect larger swathes of land, lives and properties from wildfires. While the warming globe has indeed made vegetation drier and worsened drought, the poor management of California's forests has for a long time been pointed at as a major cause of its disastrous wildfires. The Little Hoover Commission concluded in its 2018 report that the culture of fire suppression in California's forests has led to overcrowding. This potentially leads to less water supply, increased the presence of less tolerant species, made the forests less resilient, and less able to recover from fire, disease, and insects. The report also notes that several biomass facilities which would otherwise have burned dead trees for energy generation have closed.

Reducing emissions is not an end. Its primary objective must be the preservation of the ecosystem's integrity. This framing would not only accept controlled burning as not inimical to climate change's overall goal (although it would result in emissions), but also helps dissolve artificial demarcations between multilateral environmental bodies. Here, biodiversity is not just the responsibility of the Convention on Biological Diversity and climate change is not the exclusive preserve of UN Climate Change. To cut through the current global ecological crises, both regimes must become two blades of the sustainability scissors.

Mitigation and Adaptation: One Coin, Two Sides

Mitigation and adaptation (with loss and damage) are widely recognized as separate components of the climate discourse. The intersection between both is, however, insufficiently emphasized. The argument has been made that since emissions and its dire consequences are already locked in, attention should shift from mitigation to adaptation. Like the focus of multilateral bodies on

climate mitigation, California is known more for its advancements on the mitigation front. Reacting to the power outages attributed to extreme heat, California's Governor, Gavin Newsom confirmed that while weather events could be prepared for, the State failed to predict and plan appropriately.

It is important that in climate policy design, mitigation should be considered alongside adaptation. The dichotomy between both, which seems further entrenched by the Paris Agreement's largely mandatory provisions on mitigation (e.g. Art 3, 4(1)) and the primarily voluntary provisions on adaptation (Art. 7), must be removed. To be clear, taking the foot off the mitigation pedal is not an option, considering that a warmer climate makes adaptation more expensive, complicated and, in some cases, impossible. The point is that premium must equally be placed on adaptation.

Zhao *et al*. identify instances, where adaptive practices result in emissions (adaptive emissions), mitigation, undermines adaptation (new vulnerabilities), where there is a combination of adverse mitigation and adaptation practices (negative synergies), and where mitigation and adaptation practices are mutually reinforcing (positive synergies). Ideally, climate policies should aim for positive synergies. Situations calling for trade-offs are, however, more likely. Hence, the need to always consider the mitigation and adaptation dimensions of every climate policy and practice. Having singular legislative frameworks, which is a rare occurrence, could facilitate this joint approach to the various dimensions of climate change.

The 'Newsom' Way: Lessons in Constructive and Innovative Engagement

California's Governor, Gavin Newsom, had his work cut out for him when he met to brief President Donald Trump on the State's wildfires on 14 September 2020. These are two people clearly on different sides of the climate divide – Trump, the climate sceptic; Newsom, the climate advocate. Newsom, however, got Trump to concede the need to respect the "difference of opinions" on climate change. While this is arguably negligible, particularly in the light of the President's subsequent statement on 'science' not knowing if the globe is getting warmer, the engagement gives pointers on how to engage climate

sceptics and cynics. Newsom began with the areas of agreement (forest management); avoided hyperboles and overgeneralization, (for example, he did not blame climate change solely for the wildfires); spoke clearly, simply, and factually, (he avoided technical jargons); personalized the narrative ("we have not (seen) … in our history"); left out the contentious, (he did not argue that the State's way—mitigation initiatives—is the only way); and was calm, respectful but firm. There is a dearth of these virtues amongst many climate activists and advocates. The quick branding of the purveyors of counterpoints as 'climate deniers' and falsely assuming that the same strategies that have worked in the West would be effective in the rest of the world does not help in advancing the climate discourse. This is, arguably, in part, responsible for the substantial rate of global climate scepticism. For example, in its 2018 survey, the Pew Research Center found that about forty one of Nigerians, forty three percent of Russians, thirty eight of Israelis and forty one percent of Americans do not consider climate change as a significant threat.

But the Trump-Newsom meeting was also a lost opportunity for innovative engagement. The politics of 'dialect', or language, is an unsung reality in climate change discourse. The contestations that slogans and technical jargons attract, factual descriptions might avert. It might, therefore, be penny-wise and pound-foolish to remain stuck to climate buzz words. Frank Luntz advised Republicans to adopt the less emotive climate change term instead of global warming. More recently, He counselled that in place of words like 'threats' and 'new jobs', 'consequences' and 'careers' should be used. He argues that the worst communicators of a cause are its strongest advocates and that the climate problem is not just scientific, but linguistic. While President Trump did not use the language of climate adaptation, his emphasis on forest management was an inadvertent endorsement of climate adaptation. All that remained was an unbundling of what forest management (clearing increasingly dry vegetations etc.) entails and situating it within climate discourse. More must be done on alternative, adaptive, and context-specific climate dialect.

'Small' Fires: Beyond Postal Codes

According to the IPCC, 'associated wildfires' are only one of the extreme weather events that an increasingly warming globe would produce. Risks to

human health and livelihoods, heatwaves, heavy rain, and drought are few other consequences. People, mostly in developing countries, are already in the throes of these impacts. Between March 2019 and January 2020, Greenpeace reports 2 cyclones, 10 cases of floods, heavy rain, and tornadoes, 2 cases of an extreme heatwave, and 2 cases of drought. Collectively, they have made millions severely food insecure, displaced hundreds of thousands, rendered tens of thousands homeless, and caused the death of hundreds. Within the same period, the global news cycle focused on wildfires in the Amazon, Australia, and California, whilst being mostly silent on the arguably more fatal climate calamities in places like Africa. Arguably, the imbalanced coverage is so because of the conspicuousness of wildfires. However, at the same time the Amazon fire was blazing; there were five times more wildfires in Africa. Although it has now been argued that those fires were more controlled and less ecologically consequential, the point remains that attention did not turn to them until furore was raised. The values that inform climate consequences that receive global coverage must be critically appraised – postal codes or perilous circumstances?

Conclusion

While it may appear that most of the most prominent wildfires that have generated media attention are recorded in countries with climate denialism as their default climate strategy, climate change is fueling figurative and actual wildfires, and its effects are felt in different corners of the world. Developing countries—especially African countries—are, however, affected the most, despite contributing the least to global emissions. Unlike rich and insured countries, weak disaster management strategies will render developing countries unable to adapt lives and livelihoods to the impending devastation. Collective climate action at the global level must involve consistency in the mobilization of resources to facilitate urgent transition needs in the global South. Otherwise, the Californian wildfires would be one of many subsequent ‘fires’ around the world. Finally, the polycentric model of environmental governance has created many sites of authority and regimes that hardly interact, allowing power brokers to imperil the most urgent calls for action. But the intertwined nature of environmental challenges now calls for synergy of regimes and the participation of the most important actors. We can put out the fire, but we must stop turning off the smoke alarm.

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