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Looking Ahead to Paris, Leading Climate Activists Gather in California to Share Strategies and Inspiration

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In a day-long climate strategy meeting called, "Building Green Blocs: Collaborative Climate Policy Innovations," climate activists and public officials met October 15 in San Rafael, Ca. in advance of the annual Bioneers Conference to share triumphs, setbacks, and strategies for climate protection.

Bioneers is a nonprofit organization that provides a forum for discussion of social change and environmental issues. The gathering was co-sponsored by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and by the California Endowment.

Encouraged by legislative and administrative victories in rolling back greenhouse gas emissions in California and by a sense that the climate protection movement is gaining momentum, the activists were upbeat in advance of the forthcoming Paris climate talks this December.

Effective Climate Organizing

Among the common themes and "lessons learned" were these organizing tips and insights:

1. Make the effects of climate change tangible to people instead of speaking only in abstract terms about greenhouse gases.
2. Reach out to the broadest possible constituencies to form "green blocs." Middle class environmentalists, in particular, need to create coalitions with groups representing people of color, women, and low-income groups who are especially impacted by the effects of climate change and environmental injustice.
3. Talk to people about how climate change relates to "full spectrum sustainability" in energy, housing, and jobs.
4. Recognize that the impacts of human-induced climate change will last for hundreds of years, if not millennia, and that the struggle to protect the climate will have to be a long-term, ongoing effort.
5. Understand that, while activists need to strive for policy changes, ultimately the challenge for the climate movement is to change the pervasive culture and mindset regarding energy, climate, and the environment. Education about these issues is therefore of paramount and enduring importance.

6. Political leaders require strong pressure from a committed, persistent, and aroused citizenry before they will make the difficult decisions needed to protect the climate.

Breaching the 2°C "Safety" Limit

Hanging over the meeting was the critical question: Will international leaders who come together in December in Paris for what might be the most important global climate negotiations of all time be able to achieve an agreement to keep the world's average temperature from rising by more than 2°C above the pre-industrial average?

That level has often been treated by political leaders as if it were a safe limit or threshold beyond which climate change would become dangerous. The current global temperature increase of less than 1° C, however--half the target amount--is already having very dangerous effects. The 2°C threshold, while politically expedient and even necessary, is still therefore far too high to protect the planet's ecological integrity.

Currently the greenhouse gas reduction pledges made by major emitting nations collectively are not yet sufficient to keep global temperature increases below the 2°C mark. With global leaders playing catch-up on climate protection, having failed to reach a binding international treaty during more than two decades of talks, it has now devolved to subnational actors--cities, states, and regions--to blaze the trail toward rapid, meaningful carbon-emission reduction, commensurate with current climate perils. Likewise, it is incumbent on citizens to mobilize and bring intense pressure on government leaders to reach a binding and effective global climate agreement.

Neglected Critical Issues

Speaking at the climate strategy meeting, Osprey Ouriel Lake, the director of the Women's Environment and Climate Network (WECAN), pointed out that whereas scientists have told us that we must keep 80 percent of the remaining undeveloped fossil fuels in the ground, that topic is not even on the agenda of the negotiating parties.

Henk Ovink, a Dutch government expert on climate-resilient infrastructure and on sustainable design, told the gathering that water crises are the world's single greatest risk factor and that 90 percent of natural disasters are water-related. Global crises are interdependent, and climate change aggravates them, Ovink said. "If you add water crises to geopolitical crises," he added, "you have your worst nightmare."

Ovink worked on post-Hurricane Sandy recovery and resiliency planning, on loan from the Dutch government to President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force. Through an innovative collaborative design process called [Rebuild By Design](#) that he created and led, Ovink solicited rebuilding proposals from hundreds of groups and more than 3,500 individual participants. After a vetting by judges, six projects emerged victorious and are now being funded for a total of \$930 million in Federal money.

A transparent, collaborative approach to climate change, such as Rebuild by Design's, is vital to produce optimal solutions, Ovink contends, rather than conventional negotiations in which the focus is on what each group can get for itself, rather than what all can accomplish together.

Broadening the Climate Movement

To succeed, the climate movement needs to construe the climate issue broadly, says Vien Truong, Esq. national director of Green for All, a national initiative to build an inclusive green economy. The climate movement is not just about greenhouse gases, she points out. It is also about free bus passes, solar panels, community building, the economy, and jobs. The climate movement must find ways to reach across communities to create jobs and pathways out of poverty for people, Truong says.

Before working with Green for All, Truong previously led the Greenlining Institute's Environmental Equity team, which was instrumental in passing California Senate Bill 535. It directs 25 percent of California's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, created by Assembly Bill 32, to disadvantaged communities.

Green for All is currently leading a program called [Green the Church](#) to organize 1,000 African-American churches and 100,000 congregants over the next two years to take action on climate change. The three-pronged program is designed to amplify green theology, promote sustainable practices, and build political power to transform how

government acts on climate change and supports the green economy.

The impulse to protect her own children from climate threats initially motivated labor and environmental organizer Lisa Hoyos to enter the climate fight. She then co-founded and now directs [Climate Parents](#), a national organization with 50,000 members that works for clean energy, climate education for kids, and rigorous implementation of the [Federal Clean Power Plan](#). The message sent by groups like Climate Parents, Hoyos said, is that regular parents care about climate change and are mobilizing to press for clean energy policy.

International Green Blocs

California EPA Deputy Secretary for Border and Intergovernmental Relations Aimee Barnes, who attended the climate strategy meeting, is leading the state's efforts to share its successes and failures in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, with other nations and subnational groups.

Out of concern that the forthcoming Paris climate negotiations might not be aggressive enough in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to keep global temperature from increasing by more than 2°C, California and the German state of Baden-Württemberg developed a Memorandum of Understanding known as, [Under 2 MOU](#).

Signers and endorsers agree to cut their emissions by 80-95 percent by 2050, or hold their emissions to two metric tonnes of CO₂-equivalent per capita by then. To date, 46 nations, states, and cities have signed or endorsed the Under 2 MOU. Collectively, they have a combined GDP of \$14.6 trillion and represent 497 million people on five continents.

That is a very significant "green bloc" indeed, and shows how critically important subnational entities can be in moving the world toward a climate-safe future and in exerting pressure on the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters.

John J. Berger, PhD. (www.johnjberger.com) is an energy and environmental policy specialist who has produced ten books on climate, energy, and natural resource topics. He is the author of *Climate Peril: The Intelligent Reader's Guide to the Climate Crisis*, and *Climate Myths: The Campaign Against Climate Science*, and is at work on a new book about climate solutions.