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Can disaster diplomacy work to address climate change?

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"Climate crisis forces enemies to cooperate for a deal," shout the headlines around the world.

Well, not quite. The run-up to the international climate change negotiations in Copenhagen this month seems to have fermented more conflict than it resolves. Why is cooperation lacking for tackling climate change?

Canada finds itself isolated on the world stage. Australia's right-wing opposition dumped its leader, installing a climate change sceptic instead. Climate change scientists at the University of East Anglia were exposed as trying to circumvent the UK's Freedom of Information Act.

Small island developing states and Arctic communities are among the places worst affected by climate change. But they are still fighting to be heard, despite their warnings on this topic dating back 20 years.

Why has the disaster of climate change proved to be so difficult to address cooperatively at the global level? Studies on "disaster diplomacy" provide some insight.

Disaster diplomacy looks at how and why trying to deal with disasters does, or often does not, create cooperation and reduce conflict.

With climate change looming over the planet as one big disaster, why does the crisis not bring governments and people together?

Like the legend of Nero and Rome, is humanity fiddling while the fossil fuels burn? Or do legitimate reasons exist for stalling on the action needed on climate change?

Disaster diplomacy, a field of study, provides dozens of potentially illuminating case studies. They include enemy states aiding each other after earthquake disasters and scientific cooperation on monitoring hurricanes that strike countries with political conflicts. Longer-term disasters such as climate change are also explored.

Work on disaster diplomacy shows that disasters have the potential to yield cooperation in the short-term, over weeks or months. Over the longer term, non-disaster factors tend to dominate negotiations, deals, and cooperation.

Non-disaster factors could include a leadership change, such as Canada's election of the right-wing government currently in power, or belief that unresolved grievances outweigh mutually beneficial cooperation.

TIME SCALE OF CLIMATE CHANGE A PROBLEM

Consequently, basic politics intervenes: A humanitarian imperative is not necessarily the priority for leaders making decisions. Addressing a problem that will manifest in a decade might not get them re-elected tomorrow.

Consolidating power today can be more important than creating processes that last long into the future. Whether they come from democracies or dictatorships, political leaders rarely gain from helping to resolve the problems that their successors will face.

Yet climate change is a long-term issue. This disaster has built up over the long term and long-term consequences are likely, meaning that long-term solutions are necessary. Disaster diplomacy achieves little over the long-term.

Does this mean that the situation is hopeless? No. Efforts at disaster diplomacy have often focused on leaders. But case studies show how much can be achieved at different levels, including through grassroots organisations and using science.

If our leaders do not give us what we want or expect, then we must demand more. Grassroots efforts can and should push the high-level diplomats and politicians to deal with climate change and other disasters. Science can and should support that.

Even that has complications, however. Not all countries permit their leaders to be pushed. Not all democratic electorates wish to push their leaders to solve climate change and other disasters.

If these attitudes dominate, then we are in trouble. The long-term disaster of climate change will cause as many problems as are caused by other long-term disasters including poverty and resource over-exploitation.

We have an opportunity to change the situation. Climate change could be an opportunity to yield diplomacy from disaster. Will negotiators at Copenhagen grasp the challenge?