THE ‘EFFICACY PARADOX’ OF CLIMATE ACTIVISM:
THE CASE OF COP21

Joost de Moor, University of Antwerp (joost.demoor@uantwerpen.be)

Paper presented at the ECRP General Conference, Prague, 7-10 September, 2016. Please do not cite without permission of the author.

In 2010, climate activists from Rising Tide North America published a pamphlet entitled The Climate Movement is Dead. Long Live the Climate Movement. In it they stated that:

*The sooner we realize that politicians and corporations will not solve the climate crisis, the sooner we can get to the real work of building a strong grassroots people’s movement—our only hope for survival. In that regard, the failure of the December 2009 UN climate meetings in Copenhagen may be a great opportunity.*

If the network’s aspirations had materialized (as some scholars expected (Dietz, 2014)), it would have meant the end of a long tradition of mobilizations around the UN’s annual climate meeting, or Conference of Parties (COP). This was indeed not an unlikely scenario since, as Hadden noted, “the idea that the UNFCCC will not produce an acceptable climate agreement – once a radical idea even within the climate justice movement – now seems to be a fairly mainstream view.” (2015, p. 174). Interest in the UNFCCC was therefore decreasing. Nevertheless, around the 2015 Paris summit (COP21) the climate movement gathered its forces in one of the largest mobilizations in its history (de Moor, Morena, & Comby, 2016). This raises a puzzling question: If skepticism about the COP process was so high, then why were they there again?

An important part of the answer lies in the fact that even among those within the climate movement who perceive COP as weak, there is broad agreement that it is an event that generates precious momentum around the issue of climate change. Indeed, beyond the official negotiations, COPs also provide the momentum of a ‘global public sphere moment’ on climate change (Eide & Kunelius, 2010). Scholars of transnational social movements (TSMs) have long recognized that summits like COPs therefore provide focal events around which diffuse transnational social movements can coalesce and mobilize the masses (Bandy & Smith, 2005; Reitan, 2007). Summits
present common targets, and as global public sphere moments, a concrete time and space to address problems that otherwise remain illusively embedded throughout global economic and political structures (Bullard & Müller, 2012). For this reason, COPs have become essential mobilizing opportunities for the climate movement. What the movement could gain once mobilized around COPs has however become increasingly unclear.

During the first dozen of COPs, the movement has focused on influencing the negotiations to push for an ambitious climate deal (Newell, 2005). In this sense, the climate movement’s efforts largely resembled ‘transnational advocacy networks’ (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) or ‘conventional climate advocacy’ (Hadden, 2015). Environmental NGOs united in the Climate Action Network (CAN) would lobby negotiators, while rank-and-file activists staged public demonstrations, largely in support of such efforts. However, as trust in the COP’s ability to produce a just and effective climate deal has eroded over time among scholars and activists alike (especially after the failed Copenhagen summit; see Christoff, 2010; Parker, Karlsson, Hjerpe, & Linnér, 2012), so has confidence in the effectiveness of negotiations-oriented strategies withered away (e.g. Bedall & Görg, 2014; Bullard & Müller, 2012; Dietz, 2014; Hadden, 2015). While we have witnessed the spread of local, grassroots action as a response (Dietz, 2014), COP activism has persisted (Hadden, 2015).

It has done so, however, in a diversified fashion. In particular, there is a growing desire to still use the momentum of the COP to become organized whilst using its momentum for non-COP oriented strategies. This is challenging, however, as it requires organizers to go against the current of that momentum. For instance, one may want to use it for direct actions against fossil fuel industry, but how to do this effectively when all the eyes of the world are on the negotiations? The answer to this question is so complicated that we can speak of an ‘efficacy paradox’: COPs allow the climate movement to gather its forces, but it simultaneously demands attention and thereby restricts opportunities to direct those forces in a fashion that would allow to target arguably more important actors. The goal of this paper is to explain how dealing with the efficacy paradox is essential in understanding the organization, strategies and impact of the climate movement in the post-Copenhagen era.

Specifically, I will analyze how the efficacy paradox affected the movement’s mobilization for COP21 in Paris, 2015 – the movement’s largest mobilization since Copenhagen. The Paris mobilization stood out from the Copenhagen one in the sense that the movement was unified into a single coordinating network. This is not only a historical change to a movement that had until recently been described as a ‘divided network’ (Hadden, 2015); it also offers an excellent analytical
opportunity to explore the motivations and mechanisms that shape the movement and its strategies. After all, in heterogeneous coordinating networks, actors need to explicate their preferences to convince each other, and through formal and informal decision making processes, such preferences are molded into plans for action. Moreover, the climate movement has been identified as highly self-reflexive, and in constant exploration of the future directions it should take (Dietz, 2014). Directly observing such processes, and interrogating key players involved, provides an understanding many key social movements scholars agree we so urgently need if we are to truly understand why social movements behave the way they do (e.g. della Porta & Rucht, 2013; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Reitan, 2007). I therefore present findings from 17 months of online and offline observations, 30 semi-structured interviews, and extensive desk research to cover the preparations, execution and aftermath of the mobilization around COP21.

In what follows, I will first offer a more detailed discussion of organizational benefits of summit mobilizations, their strategic limitations, and the resulting efficacy paradox, and I will discuss how over time, the efficacy paradox has gradually become more dominant within the climate movement. After describing the methods used in this study, I then move on to an empirical discussion of the development and execution of the COP21 mobilization. I conclude with a critical discussion of the movement’s ability to overcome the efficacy paradox, and of its implications for the future of the international climate movement.

THE EFFICACY PARADOX OF TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Globalization, or the “the increasing volume and speed of flows of capital and goods, information and ideas, people and forces that connect actors between countries” (Keohane in Tarrow, 2005, p. 5), has often been linked to the development of transnational social movements (TSMs) (della Porta, Kriesi, & Rucht, 1999; della Porta & Tarrow, 2005; Flesher Fominaya, 2014). It gives rise to ‘global problems’ and flows of information that create awareness about the global nature of problems (Giddens, 1991). Specific forms of globalization, like neoliberalism, triggered global resistance while international governmental organizations formed new powerful targets (della Porta, 2007). At the same time, the spread of ICT and rise of a global network society has also facilitated TSMs' emergence (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2004).

However, contextual changes never produce social movements ‘automatically’. If social movement building is already a challenging process at the national, or even at the local level, it is even more so at the transnational level. According to Tarrow, “sustaining collective action across borders on
the part of people who seldom see one another and who lack embedded relations of trust is difficult” (Tarrow, 2005, p. 5). Similarly, Bandy and Smith (2005) argue that certain common organizational challenges can become amplified at the global level. Movements rely heavily on shared identities, and with the increase of geographic, organizational, strategic and political diversity associated with global movement building, developing shared a sense of identity can become problematic. Finally, as David Harvey notes in his study of anti-capitalist movements (Harvey, 1989, pp. 238–9, 1996, p. 324), social movements flourish mainly when organized around specific places, yet global problems transcend time and space, and demand movements to abandon the relative comfort of their local embeddedness.

Much of these challenges can, and have traditionally been overcome around summits, because they are specific moments in time and space where movements can come together, where elusive issues become tangible and targetable, and where common targets can bring people together (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Reitan, 2007). Surely, being able to mobilize around summits is not a sufficient condition for transnational movement building as summit mobilizations have often also been conflict ridden (Reitan, 2007). And nor is this a necessary condition as there have in fact been social movements, such as the anti-apartheid movement (Thörn, 2006), that have been able to become globally coordinated without summits. However, while internally diverse, such movements are typically characterized by a rather clearly defined issue and target. For movements addressing more elusive issues, like global justice or climate change, summits certainly have been important. The global justice movement provides a historical example of a TSM that depended heavily on “spikes of organizational activity and mass mobilization around large-scale events such as WTO and G8 meetings” (Reitan, 2007, p. 188). Indeed, deprived of a such clear targets and a specific time and place to coalesce, it becomes difficult to unite groups around the globe (Bullard & Müller, 2012).

Let me be clear: I do not wish to argue that there have been no transnational movement dynamics beyond summits – a vast body of literature shows there are plenty (Flesher Fominaya, 2014). What I wish to argue is that the degree of global coordination that global problems like climate change arguably demand – so, across topical, geographical, strategic, organizational and political boundaries – has rarely been realized beyond summits.

Indeed, for the climate movement, summits have long played a similar role, albeit that the UNFCCC officially largely advanced the same goals as the movement, whereas the GJM and international bodies like the WTO typically advanced opposing goals. Nonetheless, it is clear that COPs have played a central role in the formation of a global climate movement. From the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the climate change movement emerged hand in hand with the UNFCCC, aiming to influence its policy process by lobbying negotiators with an expertise-based critique. So,
where organizations like WTO and G8 presented powerful drivers of change that needed to be stopped, the UNFCCC presented a force for solving a problem that needed to be pushed in the right direction (Dietz, 2014; Newell, 2005; Reitan, 2007). In both cases, organizational opportunities thus coincided with opportunities to win substantive gains.

However, while summits continue to present movements with important organizational opportunities, it is increasingly being questioned whether much can be gained from them in substantive terms in the age of ‘gridlock’: “in our increasingly interconnected world, global problems, from climate change to financial market crises, call for increased collective and cooperative action, but multilateralism’s ability to achieve this has eroded relative to the challenges it faces” (Hale, Held, & Young, 2013, p. 3). Since the failed Copenhagen summit, this notion has become widely recognized within the climate movement. According to Hadden, “the idea that the UNFCCC will not produce an acceptable climate agreement – once a radical idea even within the climate justice movement – now seems to be a fairly mainstream view.” (2015, p. 174). So while COPs may have continued to present events around which to coalesce, it became increasingly questionable what there was to gain once there (Bullard & Müller, 2012).

This situation presents the climate movement with an ‘efficacy paradox’: to be influential, social movements need to be numerous and united (Tilly, 2006), and summits typically provide TSMs with the opportunity to fulfill this need (Flesher Fominaya, 2014; Reitan, 2007). Nevertheless, movements’ strength is bounded by that of the systems it targets, and the arguable weakness of UNFCCC thus limits the climate movement’s capacity to advance substantive change. This issue fundamentally challenges the way this movement operates, but also our theories about TSMs more broadly. In this study I analyze how the climate movement perceived and addressed this challenge in its global mobilization for COP21.

**METHODOLOGY**

According to key social movement scholars, too little research analyzes ‘the ongoing accomplishment of collective action’ (McAdam et al., 2001; Reitan, 2007). Scholars sometimes interrogate these dynamics afterwards, once the actions that drew their attention have taken place, but they thereby expose their research to serious retrospective bias. For instance, witnesses are likely to misrepresent, tone down, or overlook formative internal disputes, and mobilization processes will consequently be painted as overly unidirectional or peaceful. Consequently, complexities, like the efficacy paradox, often remain overlooked. This problem becomes only
bigger if we realize that in this fashion we only look at the actions that become executed, while we overlook plans for action that were abandoned (Koopmans, 2005). Authors agree, therefore, that those dynamics should be analyzed as they take place (e.g. della Porta & Rucht, 2013). Accordingly, I have analyzed the mobilization of the climate movement towards and around COP21 as it unfolded. To do so, I used Burawoy’s (1998) ‘extended case method’. At its core, this method uses ‘theory-driven participant observation’ (Lichterman, 2002) to build a deep understanding of social movement dynamics, which are complimented with interviews.

**Observations**

The analytical backbone of study has consisted of observing the online and offline meetings of the two main coalitions that mobilized around COP21: Coalition Climat 21 (CC21) and Climate Justice Action (CJA).1 During their meetings, actors have needed to negotiate their strategic preferences. This creates a ‘natural focus group’ setting in which subjects discuss theoretically relevant issues, while retaining strong internal validity. Hence, these observations directly address my goal of understanding the internal organizational and strategic processes as they unfold. To ensure that I was aware of all relevant meetings, I have constantly monitored the movements’ main email lists. Through investment in personal contacts with activists, I have been able to get full access to the movements’ meetings. As a result, most of the coalitions’ international meetings have been observed: Between October 2014 and March 2016, 20 online meetings of about 1-2 hours and 11 offline international meetings of up to three days have been observed (21 days in total). During observations, I have kept a largely passive role.

Although observing meetings provides a good insight into how strategic plans are developed, plans must ultimately be turned into actions, and this translation process is not straightforward. For one, unexpected events can seriously disrupt plans. As a case in point, when Paris was hit by terror attacks on November 13, just two weeks before COP21, the French state responded with a ‘state of emergency’ that implied a general ban on protesting. It was therefore crucial that during COP21, I was in Paris for more than two weeks to observe meetings and actions around COP21. These observations showed that many actions did still take place, and that most of them followed directly from the original plans, but it also showed how organizers and activists had to modify these plans at the last moment.

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1 Climate Justice Action around COP21 is not the same as around COP15. While there are important similarities in terms of strategic and political views, and some overlaps in membership, the two are distinct. The CJA group around COP21 was looking for a name, and realizing its similarities with CJA from COP15, and the fact that the latter network had seized to exist, it adopted the latter’s name.
Interviews

In addition to these observations interviews have been conducted with key representatives of organizations. Interviews allow me to further tease out why key actors take certain positions in the meetings I observe. Because observations can be clarified through interviews, they contribute to my understanding of the debates that shape the movement. Interviews have thus allowed me to further deepen my understanding of how the efficacy paradox affects the movement’s strategies and coordination. Next to many more informal interviews around observations, a total of 30 semi-structured interviews of one to two hours have been conducted with key representatives of most main organizations participating in this mobilization.

Desk research

Field research was constantly supported by ‘desk research’. This predominantly consisted of the monitoring of key mailing lists of CC21 and CJA, as well as their websites and social movement accounts, and the documents that were being shared through these channels. Doing so allowed me to keep track of where and when important meetings would take place, and of the preparatory processes for these meetings, which are often significant because they shape agendas and can lay the foundations for alliances between actors. Moreover, desk research also allowed me to keep track of important documents that were spread throughout online networks. In short, even though key decisions in the movement were generally still taken in face-to-face meetings, these decisions are often shaped and driven through online preparations.

THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT AROUND COP21

A unified network

As mentioned above, what stood out about the Paris mobilization in comparison to the one in Copenhagen was the degree of cooperation across the movement’s political and strategic spectrum (cf. Hadden, 2014, 2015; Reitan, 2010). Groups who had until recently been united in two largely detached networks now cooperated in the same coalitions. More specifically, the largest coalition, Coalition Climate 21 (hereafter CC21), represented large, moderate NGOs, like WWF, as well as radical grassroots networks, like Reclaim the Power, and groups from both the global North and
South. At the same time, CC21 closely cooperated with the radical grassroots action network Climate Justice Action (CJA). Several key organizers from groups like 350.org and Greenpeace played important roles in both networks, and CC21 and CJA cooperated on the largest radical action that was planned during COP21 (see below). Of course, there was often still an important degree of distrust between grassroots groups and professional NGOs, at times making cooperation precarious and dependent of intense diplomacy. Yet most groups recognized the importance of presenting the movement in a unified fashion, and of ensuring an enforcing coordination between their actions.

The perceived failure of Copenhagen normalized a more skeptical attitude towards the COP, and thereby brought radical and moderate actors closer together (Dietz, 2014). Signs of the movement’s unification became already clear during the movement’s ‘walkout’ of COP19 in Warsaw, bringing together groups like CAN International and Friends of the Earth International in a joined protest against the fossil fuel industry’s access to the negotiations (Hadden, 2015, p. 161). According to an organizer from CAN France, this coordinated action advanced mutual trust. Moreover, she noted that because CAN France represented a more radical chapter of CAN International, they were capable of building a bridge between more moderate actors within CAN, and more radical climate justice groups like Attac (Interview CAN France, 2015). Indeed, it were these two organizations who in January 2014 organized the first meeting of what later became CC21, bringing together a diverse assembly of groups around the idea of a joint mobilization for COP21, including groups affiliated more closely to CAN and to CJN!, as well as newcomers, like the lifestyle politics-oriented (de Moor, 2016) group Alternatiba. After two more national meetings, CC21 organized its first international meeting in August 2014, bringing in groups from around the world that mirrored the diversity already mobilized at the national level. From this meeting onwards, CC21 became the largest and broadest national and international coalition in the mobilization for COP21.

Parallel to this process, CJA, a more radical, grassroots-oriented action network emerged. From its first meeting in Cologne in October 2014, CJA brought together mainly European groups around the idea that COP21 presented a mobilizing opportunity for radical grassroots action as well. CJA and CC21 were clearly distinct from each other in a number of ways: CJA was made up of grassroots groups, while CC21 was characterized by large NGOs. Moreover, CJA was geographically more restricted to Europe, and politically and strategically they leaned towards the more radical end of the spectrum. This, however, did not prevent the coalitions from working together. As mentioned, some actions were coordinated. Moreover, those actions that were not officially endorsed by CC21 could still be promoted at CC21 meetings.
While space prevents me from outlining decision making processes within CC21 and CJA in detail, it is relevant to note that both coalitions pursued a degree of consensual decision making (Haug, 2013). Some decision making processes clearly took place behind the screens, but key strategic decisions were always made on the basis of consensus in plenaries of international meetings. From a methodological point of view, this is important because it confirms the importance of looking at the strategic and political views of key organizers, as is the empirical basis of this study.

**COP21 as an opportunity**

Cooperation within the climate movement remained highly contentious as widely varying political and strategic views needed to be reconciled, or at least coordinated. To begin understanding this process, it is essential to grasp what groups believed could be won around COP21. Throughout interviews with key organizers, it became clear that organizers held rather diverse and complex views of what COP21 would be an opportunity for. While it may once have been commonplace to perceive COP as a space to influence the global governance of climate change, many organizers now viewed COP in very different regards, ranging from the advancement of national policy campaigns, to the normalization of direct action. Referring to the failed Copenhagen summit, they expressed skepticism about the degree to which COP21 provided an opportunity to exert political influence. However, not all groups abandoned the idea that COP was an opportunity to influence a meaningful political process. As I will discuss in detail below, this had significant implications for the mobilization.

Some groups, including trade unions and Avaaz, believed that people could be realistically told that by joining demonstrations in Paris, they could help build the pressure that would be needed to make politicians sign an ambitious and meaningful climate deal. On the one hand, they built their hope that this could be a realistic scenario on signs from the political context. For instance, the G7’s statement of June 2015 that the age of fossil fuel was over was interpreted as a promising sign that world leaders would take concurrent climate action in Paris: “We are in a much different place than we were before Copenhagen and we do think that the signs are here to get an agreement” (Interview Avaaz, 2015). On the other hand, Avaaz’s organizers perceived this mobilization strategy as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Promising people there would be high chances of success could help bring out the number of people needed to make those promises come true. Hence, even though these groups did not believe that COP21 could solve the climate crisis, with the help of movements it could make an important step in the right direction.
Many other groups were much more skeptical about the possibility of a satisfactory summit outcome. Based on the Copenhagen failure they had concluded that the COP process was fundamentally incapable of delivering, and the movement could not change anything about that – regardless of the number of people it could mobilize. This image was confirmed in the run up to Paris when for instance the ‘political outcome of the Lima conference [COP20] (...) was worse than expected.’ (Interview Greenpeace France, 2015). They therefore feared that any high hopes would inevitably be smashed in a similar fashion to what happened after Copenhagen – a scenario that had to be prevented at all costs. Doing so, many agreed, essentially depended on painting a realistic picture of what could possibly be achieved in Paris. Keeping expectations of a strong climate deal low was an essential part of that, even if it meant restricting the number of people that could be mobilized because of a rather pessimistic framing. At least, those who could still be mobilized would have decent chance of staying active in the movement because they would have entered on the premise of realistic expectations. As one organizer explained:

[The goal for COP21 is] to build momentum so that after, you actually have a climate movement, that we can go back to fighting battles on the ground, that the UK can go back to fighting fracking, and in other places... the Germans can go back to stopping coal. And people go back feeling that we actually do have a movement and it’s not all focused on the UN. It's focused on what we are doing now. I mean COP21 has to be about after COP21. That is the big lesson from Copenhagen: not focusing on the fucking talks themselves. (Interview, Corporate Europe Observatory, 2015).

These views formed a fundamental cleavage within the movement. Even though I will show that positions were not binary, the cleavage roughly set apart ‘reformists’ who still believed in negotiation-oriented strategies from ‘transformists’ who saw COP as weak and wanted to increase distance from the COP (Kalm & Uhlin, 2015). Even though both sides of the cleavage aspired a coordinated mobilization, this was sometimes complicated by the fact that their views of COP21 as an opportunity actually contradicted. Specifically, some groups’ strategies to get the maximum number of people to join actions around Paris were at odds with others’ strategies of keeping people in the movement in the long run. There thus appeared to be a contradiction between movement building and mobilization. The two are typically perceived as two sides of the same coin, where to build a movement, mobilization needs to bring people into the movement. In the case of COP21, however, there was a contradiction between the two, which led to fundamentally different strategic preferences.
Strategic plans for COP21

These widely varying perceptions of opportunities around COP21 informed equally diverse strategic preferences. However, they crystalized around an intense debate over the timing of the mobilization. Whereas reformists wanted to mobilize at the beginning to influence the official climate negotiations, transformists wanted to mobilize at the end, to signify a break away from the process. Ultimately the debate was settled by agreeing on mobilizing at both moments.

The first weekend mobilizations thus focused on influencing politicians’ decision making. This, however, reflected two further distinct approaches. According to de Moor, Morena and Comby (2016), some groups followed the traditional reformist approach of influencing the COP negotiations, whereas others had been more involved in trying to influence national governments’ commitments to mitigation (INDCs). Both groups advocated mass demonstrations in order to communicate citizens’ messages to political decision makers, yet while the former groups advanced an international demonstration in Paris to target the international political process, the latter advocated decentralized mobilizations in capitals around the world to target national delegations on their way to Paris. For French group these goals spatially coincided of course. This distinction again hinged on a discussion about the ability of the COP process to produce a solution to the climate crisis. The former group continued to believe that a solution to the climate crisis could be driven by a top-down, transnational political decision, if only citizens would put sufficient pressure. The latter believed climate change would be increasingly dealt with through bottom-up solutions, and therefore needed to be addressed at the national level. Even though they sometimes perceived COP as potentially important in directing this process, it is remarkable that the latter group’s timing did not coincide with the timing of the development of INDCs (which had to be submitted already months before the COP). Clearly, then, timing was determined by an effort to make use of the momentum generated by the COP, rather than by political opportunity.

Not everyone was motivated to invest in the first weekend mobilizations by a belief in the possibilities of having meaningful influence on a powerful process. An organizer from the International Trade Union Confederation suggested that what mattered was to render people vocal on the issue of climate change. This was a goal in itself, rendering political opportunities largely irrelevant. An organizer from Friends of the Earth International indicated that he believed claims should mainly be made in the beginning to judge negotiators’ expected inability to meet them, thereby providing a justification for escalated action towards the end of the COP and afterwards:

*By setting out demands we know already that the climate negotiators are not going to deliver those demands, but it gives you a moment to be able to come back after the Cop and say there have not met out demands,*
it is up to us people to have the power to transform our own country. (Interview, Friends of the Earth International, 2015).

However, most of the groups who questioned how relevant the official political process around COP21 still was typically chose to mobilize during the closing weekend of the COP (on December 12, or D12) to signify their distance from the negotiations. Again, two approaches can be distinguished, which in practice were however not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to have ‘the last word’ about COP21. In particular groups within CC21, including Greenpeace France, 350.org and Attac, wanted to mobilize at the moment when world leaders would come out of the Bourget to celebrate an agreement. The organizers anticipated that politicians would celebrate the presumably insufficient outcome as a great success. Their goal, therefore, would be to put emphasis on the agreement’s shortcomings, to disrupt its celebration, and to emphasize the need for movement action into 2016 as politicians would have once more proven their inability.

On the other hand, there were organizers for whom even calling out the summit outcome was too COP-oriented. Particularly within CJA, organizers sought ways to make use of the COP momentum, but without investing any energy in the process (yet still condemning COP in doing so). They defended the idea that the COP momentum should be used to target other, more powerful actors, such as the fossil fuel industry, or investment banks supporting the latter. Doing so was seen as a direct defense against the culprits of climate change, but mainly as a means to struggle against the corporate control of government processes – a struggle to reclaim democratic power needed to stop climate change. Furthermore, there was broad support (within CC21 and CJA) for using the COP as an opportunity to advance concrete alternatives to the climate crisis, such as clean energy and sustainable lifestyle options. Finally, as mentioned above, many agreed that the main goal of the mobilization was to build a climate movement beyond Paris. This was of course something no-one denied was important, but mainly the transformists, who saw no immediate value in the COP itself, emphasized it.

To some extent, these ambitions were turned into concrete plans. Within the online platform ‘Climate Games’, activists prepared many small-scale, playful, disobedient actions, often targeting corporations. Moreover, groups including Corporate Europe Observatory, Attac and La Via Campesina prepared an action to disrupt ‘Solutions COP21’, an official COP21 event where large corporations like ENGI, Avril, and Renault could present their solutions to the climate crisis. According to many within the climate movement, these were all false solutions, intended only to greenwash corporate images. The ‘False Solutions COP21’ action therefore intended to disrupt,
and possibly shut down, this event in order to call out the event as a farce, to emphasize the destructive nature of arguably false solutions like fracking, and to broadcast the real solutions the movement had to offer. Concerning the latter, they intended to point towards CC21’s Global Village of Alternatives where numerous organizations would present their alternatives to the climate crisis during the middle weekend of the COP. Clearly, by engaging in a public debate on the nature of false and real solutions to the climate crisis, the movement managed to come up with concrete action plans that did not focus on the negotiations.

However, organizers also ran into several problems when trying to come up with alternative strategies. Firstly, they simply could not find suited alternative targets. An exploration during a meeting of CJA in May 2015 revealed that there were no obvious fossil fuel industry targets near Paris, and since the actions would take place on a Saturday, offices of ‘climate criminals’ would be closed. Secondly, they began to doubt how possible it would actually be to divert attention of media and the general public away from the COP. Trying to do so would imply a steeper up-hill struggle, and questions were raised whether it would not be more effective to go where the attention was (i.e. around the negotiations). As one CJA organizer claimed: “there is more than COP, but not on the 12th of December” (Observational note, 3-10-2015). Thirdly, and in line with the second point, organizers feared that it would be challenging to mobilize people by telling them that they should come to Paris to ignore the COP. Experienced activists may have understood this message, but those who had for instance not shared in the ‘Copenhagen hangover’ would have had a harder time understanding why the COP should be ignored. With surprising similarity to Avaaz’s motivation for focusing on the first weekend, they argued that targeting the COP was the way to bring the largest number of people into the movement. Finally, some key organizers within CJA came to argue that the UNFCCC wasn’t such an insignificant system after all. They argued that government leaders in the negotiations only created an image of weakness as an excuse for not being responsive to citizens’ demands. In particular, issues relating to finance for climate change adaptation in developing countries was seen as an issue the negotiations were fully capable of delivering on. Moreover, they argued that it was the only game in town at the global level that could therefore not be ignored, and even though the system had important weaknesses, its multilateral structure at least gave an equal voice to all countries, and was therefore preferable to any bilateral alternative.

These challenges go a long way in explaining why after months of pursuing non-COP oriented strategies, the largest disobedient action became focused rather strongly on the COP. The idea that would become the ‘Red Lines’ action was first proposed during a CJA meeting in January 2015 in Brussels by an activists from the UK-based Reclaim the Power network. The proposal was to build a blockade around the Bourget conference center near the end of the summit to lock negotiators
inside until they would sign a strong and just climate deal. The proposal was received with much skepticism (28 present indicated to dislike the idea, while only two indicated they liked it). Some saw the idea as unrealistic given the expected level of security around the conference center, but the idea’s focus on, and expectation from, the negotiations was perceived as the biggest weakness. Many feared that it would inevitably lead to a repetition of the Copenhagen hangover. At that time, much more momentum gathered around actions targeting corporate power through decentralized actions in the Climate Games framework. The idea re-emerged, however, during CJA’s fourth meeting at the climate camp of Bure, France, in August 2015. Again, the ‘block in’ was proposed, this time with the idea to build the blockade of ‘red lines’ that would represent ‘the minimum necessities for a just and livable planet.’ Like during all subsequent meetings where the idea was proposed, concerns were raised about its focus on the COP. Indeed, even the organizers proposing the idea struggled to justify why such a focus would be desirable. At one moment they suggested that the COP was actually the best system there was (see above), and that they were not asking anything from it, but would force it to act, while at another moment they claimed that they expected nothing from the COP, and negotiators’ expected crossing of the red lines would symbolize the necessity for the movement to take matters into its own hands. What appears to have been decisive for the ones proposing the idea, as well as for the other organizers who gradually came to accept it, was not the expectation of any substantive gains that could be won by targeting the COP, but rather the fact that it appeared as the only target around which the masses could effectively be mobilized. Even during the last international CC21 meeting where the action was proposed as one of the two official D12 actions, a group of organizers made a final proposal for an additional action with a corporate target, but they withdrew after realizing the practical constraints others had discovered before them. It was accepted therefore that D12 would be about having the last word and delegitimizing the COP outcome.

Though some clearly distinct political and strategic views thus crystalized around the debate on the first and last weekend mobilizations, it is important to keep in mind that these distinctions were not absolute. Perceptions of the COP’s ability to solve the climate crisis were not binary, but rather a spectrum. On the more positive side of that spectrum, organizers saw the COP as potentially fruitful, but recognized that it would not solve the crisis alone, therefore acknowledging that non-COP oriented action was important as well. On the more negative side of the spectrum, many saw COP as fundamentally incapable of addressing climate change, but agreed that specific issues could be won there. This mutual understanding facilitated the development of a joined call for action that discursively tied the two moments of mobilization together by saying that demands made during the first weekend could be used as a standard for evaluation during the last weekend. Consequently,
fundamental differences within the movement could be resolved. Furthermore, several groups, including 350.org, Attac, and Friends of the Earth were even involved in both moments. Hence, although important differences persisted within the movement, it had come a long way since Copenhagen in unifying its ranks.

**Actions in Paris**

While analyzing the strategic decision making process provides us with fundamental insights into motivation underlying particular strategies, the translation of strategic plans into actual action is never straightforward. In particular in the current case, strategic plans had to be fundamentally revised when terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, just two weeks before COP21, dramatically changed the context of mobilization. Beyond the immediate shock and rising questions about security in Parisian public space, the most dramatic impact on the mobilization came from the French authorities’ response to the attacks (see Wahlström & de Moor (2016) for a detailed discussion). Immediately after the attacks, a state of emergency was installed, granting extra-judiciary powers to the police, such as the ability to do house raids and put people under house arrest without permission of a judge. In several occasions, these powers were used to target activists as well. A squat where activists were preparing actions was raided by a large and heavily armed police force, and several activists, including CC21’s legal adviser, were put under house arrest. The most direct impact came, however, from the protest ban: no more than two people were allowed to wear a political message in public space, with violations being punishable with fines up to 75,000 euros, and six months in prison. As Wahlström and de Moor (2016) describe, these regulations were never fully exercised, yet they forced organizers to change their plans nonetheless. Still, more actions took place than space permits to describe here. I will focus on the largest events.

The reformists suffered perhaps the most immediate impact. With no intent to oppose the protest ban, the demonstration in Paris was cancelled. The decentralized demonstrations across the world continued, however, bringing hundreds of thousands of people to the street around the world. Despite the protest ban, several action still took place in Paris. Avaaz had collected shoes it put on the Place de la République to symbolize the cancelled march. Alternatiba, Attac France and Friends of the Earth France organized a ‘human chain for a climate of peace’ along the original itinerary of the march, where people would stand side by side, holding the messages made for the march. The police condoned the action after the organizers could convince them that by standing side by side, there would be no crowd that would form a vulnerable target for terrorists. A local group called ‘Les Désobéissants’, however called for an outright defiance of the protest ban, bringing
approximately five to ten thousand individuals to Place de la République, resulting in clashes with riot police.

Five days later, on December 4, an adapted version of the ‘False Solutions COP21’ action took place. Instead of the originally planned blockade to prevent anyone from going inside, organizers opted for a less confrontational strategy and for moving the action to the inside of the Grand Palais, thereby making sure they did not hold a political message in public space, thus not violating the protest ban. On the inside, they gave what they called a ‘toxic tour’: in front of the companies’ stands, they would loudly inform their audiences about the false solutions that were being presented there. The action did not last very long, however as plain clothes police threw out the activists – as well as several journalists. Outside, some protest continued, and the conference center was closed for the rest of the day.

The next day, CC21’s Global Village of Alternatives and the Citizens Climate Forum started in Montreuil, a suburb of Paris. Neither of these events were particularly affected by the state of emergency. As planned, stands filled various streets with displays of sustainable alternatives relating to food, energy, building and so on. In several buildings surrounding the area there were workshops, panel discussions and action trainings for the last weekend actions.

From Monday 7 December till Friday 11, the ‘Zone Action Climat’ (or ZAC) was held in a large building called the ‘104’ in the center of Paris. Like in the Citizens Climate Forum, various workshops, lectures, panel discussions and trainings for the Red Lines action were given. There was also CC21’s daily general assembly, covering a daily theme (e.g., climate and free trade, climate and energy, etc.), as well as a daily debrief from the negotiations center. Often, the conclusion of this debrief was that the negotiations were not progressing sufficiently, and that citizens’ climate action, was urgently needed. For instance, an organizer from 350.org called activists in the 104 to join the Red Lines action: ‘We've just heard an update about the negotiations and quite frankly, these governments have been meeting for 21 years, and they haven't figured out how to deal with climate change. It's up to us!’ (Observational note, 9-12-2015).

What this Red Lines action was going to look like in the new context remained unclear for a very long time. The organizers repeatedly needed to adjust their plans to a constantly changing context, and to the extent that plans were clear to themselves, the organizers kept key information to themselves to outsmart the police. What was always clear was that organizers were determined to hold a disobedient Red Lines action, but that it would not do so around the Bourget. In a context of heightened tensions, they considered it to be irresponsible to engage in a confrontation with police near a conference center full of government leaders, and they also did not want to bring
extra police to the surrounding area whose Muslim community had already been targeted more frequently by the police since the terrorist attacks of November 13. Instead they planned to enact the symbolic red lines in the center of Paris. Despite threats of severe repression, the organizers continued to state that an action would take place, and ultimately the police decided to permit the action. On December 12, roughly 15,000 individuals gathered on the Avenue de Grande Armée, mostly wearing red, carrying red roses, and draping a 100 meter long red cloth to draw the ‘red line’ they would protect. Even though the original action plans evolved around the negotiations, no clear references to the negotiations were noticeable during the action. The most heard and read slogans were rather generic like ‘System change, not climate change’, and ‘What do we want? Climate justice! When do we want it? Now!’ After the Red Lines action ended according to plan, activists move to the ‘convergence space’ at the Eiffel tower, where the movement would have the last word. A part of the red lines activists staged a disobedient sit-in just in front of the area that authorities had approved for the meeting, but no confrontations followed. Those who did continue could join a crowd that was standing in front of a stage where prominent speakers, including Naomi Klein, gave their comments on the final negotiation text that had been made public earlier that afternoon, warning that the text signified a death sentence for millions of people, as it would not be able to keep global warming under three degree Celsius, again making an appeal to citizens to keep the climate struggle alive into 2016 and beyond.

THE PERSISTENT CHALLENGE OF THE EFFICACY PARADOX

So to what degree did the movement manage to realize its main goals? Answering this question has often been identified as one of the most important tasks for social movement scholars, but also as the most challenging ones (Bosi, Giugni, & Uba, 2016). To some extent, it therefore also lies beyond the focus of this paper. In particular, it is not possible to assess whether mobilizations during the first weekend had any influence on the establishment of the Paris Agreement, and even though some groups did claim such a victory (Avaaz claimed that ‘this is what we marched for’ (Avaaz, 2015)), it was heavily debated within the movement whether the agreement, – given its non-binding character – was a success at all (see below). However, some of the other commonly stated goals for the mobilization do allow for a more immediate evaluation. Those include: offering a more critical interpretation of the summit outcome in the public debate; using the momentum generated by the COP to target other actors; and building a stronger climate movement for the long run, including the mobilization of new participants and the bridging of internal cleavages. So to what degree was the movement able to realize these goals?
Much of the movement’s energy was dedicated to ‘having the last word’. Indeed, it was precisely for this reason that actions were planned on the Saturday after the ending of the COP. So did the movement effectively have the last word, thereby determining the interpretation of the Paris Agreement as insufficient and requiring sustained action by citizens? If we take media coverage as an indicator, the impact seems to have been relatively limited. Social media may be important in this regard as well, but they cater self-selected audiences, whereas mainstream media are perceived more broadly, thus advancing the goal of shaping the public interpretation of COP more clearly. Overall, media coverage of the summit outcome was positive, often describing the Paris Agreement as a historical turning point. The D12 actions and its message seems to have received very little coverage, and did not really affect public discourse, as noted by activists during a debrief meeting on December 13th as well. Some online independent media such as The New Internationalist reported on it, but mainstream media hardly did. Where there was mentioning of the protest (e.g., on the website of the BBC), framing was ‘episodic’ (Iyengar, 1987) and the movement’s ‘last word’ was nowhere to be heard. Even the Guardian, which had provided particularly extensive coverage of the movement and of the preparations for the Red Lines action specifically, posted no more than a short video clip of the demonstration on its website that offered no insight into the protesters’ message, and they shared a photo on its live feed with a caption directly contradicting the core goals of D12: “Organisers of rallies in the French capital say there are more than 10,000 people on the streets calling for a strong climate deal” (the Guardian, italics added). Getting the transformists’ framing across appears to have been impossible. For the gathering at the Eiffel Tower the image is similar. Most attention was sucked up by the summit itself, and while some critical voices were heard, these could not be traced back to the D12 actions (e.g. people were interviewed as spokespersons of particular organizations).

Clearly, drawing attention away from official negotiations proved challenging. However, this also seems to have been due at least in part to circumstantial causes, and so, under more favorable conditions, this strategy may have been more successful. For one, the state of emergency and the protest ban turned the Red Lines action into a much more moderate demonstration than originally planned (Wahlström & de Moor, 2016). A more confrontational action may have raised more questions about the dissonance between celebrating politicians on the one hand, and transgressive protest on the other. The second issue relates to timing. The action was intended to take place after the negotiations were over, yet when this would be the case exactly was unknown: COPs have an official closing date, but traditionally negotiations run late. Organizers therefore needed to gamble when the action should take place – a bet they lost. Precisely when the movements were taking the streets, the climax of the negotiations was unfolding with the final negotiation text emerging around
noon, and the agreement being signed just after 6pm. This did not only absorb most media attention during the day, but importantly, also disrupted the timing of the ‘last word’. Had the action taken place after the actual closing of COP21, the actions may have been more readily interpretable as a critique of the summit’s outcome.

As for the degree to which the movement was able to use the momentum of COP21 to target other actors, success appears to have been limited by more fundamental challenges. It needs to be noted first that both the False Solutions COP21 action and the Global Village of Alternatives relatively successfully drew attention to the issue of corporate greenwashing, and to the existence of ‘real’ alternatives within the movement. Both actions received a fair degree of media attention, often with ‘standing’ and ‘preferred framing’ (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993) – perhaps due to a lack of competition with other events. However, at the same time much of the energy of the more radical forces in the movement ended up focusing on the COP through the D12 actions. So in terms of its immediate impact, focus certainly was on COP21 – much against what many organizers had originally intended. It appears therefore that the COP offers a degree of momentum around the issue of climate change, but that it does not allow those who try to use the momentum to divert attention away from it.

Finally, the movement had tried to use the COP as an opportunity to build the climate movement for the long run. On a micro level, the aim had been to bring in new people, and to galvanize their participation for climate actions beyond COP. The degree to which this has been a success remains to be seen and is beyond the scope of this study. What seems clear at least, is that the state of emergency limited the number of people that could be brought in in the first place. On the meso level, the aim had been to bring together groups working on climate change in a more unified climate movement. Given the breadth of CC21, and its cooperation with CJA, this seems to be have been quite successful in the run up to, and during, COP21. Unions, NGOs and grassroots groups collaborating under a joined call for action, including civil disobedience was previously unseen, and marked an enormous degree of unification since Copenhagen (Hadden, 2015). However, as argued above, opportunities to use this moment of unification effectively around COP21 appear to have been limited. Put differently, it appears to have been impossible to overcome the ‘efficacy paradox’ through a revision of summit mobilizations, something an experienced organizer had already predicted months before COP:

“when you say summit protest, I think it is a little bit like (...) those couples that say “Hey, we are going to get married, it will be totally different. We will do everything in our own way”. And certainly in the end you realize it is a really traditional wedding (...). And my concern is (...) the summit protest is so ritualized by now, that it is very hard to do something fundamentally different.” (Interview, Rosa Luxembourg Foundation, 2015)
For many organizers, this realization has highlighted the urgency of building a climate movement beyond COP, and the fact that representatives from across the climate movement were present in Paris offered a key opportunity to start building such a movement.

To grasp this opportunity, a meeting was organized on the 1st of December. Though some groups (including Avaaz) were absent, the meeting was attended by representatives from many major NGOs within the movement, as well as representatives from smaller, often climate justice-affiliated groups. In fact, the meeting was so well attended that with dozens of organizers, the room was overcrowded. After everyone presented what they sought to gain from such a network, the meeting’s facilitators proposed to hold a meeting to continue the discussion on a global movement beyond COP in Berlin in February 2016. While some supported the proposal, many groups were critical. Particularly groups from the Global South feared that as a result of the location of the meeting, they would be underrepresented. Two more meetings, as well as diplomacy behind the screens (with Friends of the Earth International as a broker), ultimately led to the agreement to meet in Berlin, under the condition that available resources would be used to ensure that groups from the Global South would be sufficiently represented. The agreement was celebrated as an opportunity to keep links built around COP21 alive as the movement would move beyond the COP process.

At first, the movement seemed to have made a successful start, yet during a conference call of CC21’s ‘international facilitation body’ in January 2016 that was intended to begin preparing the Berlin meeting, it became clear that despite promises in Paris, too many issues had remained unresolved. Towards the end of the call, the initiators of the Berlin-meeting concluded that there were too many obstacles and too little trust between groups to continue the process, and that they deemed it futile to invest more energy in it, after which the meeting was cancelled. To keep the process alive, it was agreed that an online survey would be spread among those involved in the COP21 mobilization to make an inventory of wishes for a movement beyond COP, yet as I write this paper, this survey, nor any other initiative, appear to have been launched.

**CONCLUSION**

Just like climate change itself (Levin, Cashore, Bernstein, & Auld, 2012), the ‘efficacy paradox’ appears to be a wicked problem that knows no straightforward solutions. In fact, some of the root causes underlying the efficacy paradox can be attributed precisely to the difficulties of addressing climate change itself. Climate change is an elusive problem, involving a very broad range of actors,
but given its embeddedness in global economic, social and political structures, knows no obvious time or place to address it. As it relates to such a very broad range of issues, there are perhaps opportunities for the climate movement to link its struggle to those of other movements, and even to become a ‘movement of movements’ (della Porta, 2007), yet this multiplicity of issues also makes activists question whether the movement can have a sufficiently strong identity. Finally, this also implies that there is no clear power center that has control over the problem, and that could therefore function as an obvious target around which the movement could both unify its forces and have a significant substantive impact. In sum, the efficacy paradox is a wicked problem because of the apparent need for a globally coordinated approach that raises fundamental organizational challenges, and the opportunity to (partially) overcome these challenges in mobilizing around COPs which raises the issue of strategic limitations of summit mobilizations.

This is precisely why, as I have shown in this paper, the efficacy paradox can hardly be solved around COPs. Surely, not all groups would agree on the existence of an efficacy paradox. However, beliefs in the UNFCCC’s ability to address climate change have been steadily declining. The very reason many groups still mobilized for COP21, therefore, lies in the fact that they saw it as an opportunity to get groups together and to mobilize the masses, and not in any perceived opportunity to influence a substantively meaningful political process. This meant for many groups that the energy mobilized around the COP should be used in a fashion that would be independent of that arguably weak process, yet their ability to do this appears to have been limited. COP only offers its momentum in return for a significant degree of attention. Hence, while COP21 indeed allowed the movement to mobilize the masses, and in particular to build a movement of unseen breadth, it forced organizers to invest in a process many had wished to ignore.

Recent attempts to build a global movement beyond COP suggest, however, that the efficacy paradox can neither be overcome easily by abandoning COP mobilizations. Doing so may create opportunities to address actors that many organizers perceive as more powerful (e.g. the fossil fuel industry), yet it enforces some of the challenges typically associated with transnational movement building, such as conflicts over political, geographical, strategic and organizational identities. A Brazilian attendee to first meeting on a climate movement beyond COPs in Paris articulated these concerns as follows:

*Even if we know we are not only here because of the COP, the COP provides us a very important framework that unites us. (...) If there wasn’t the COP, I don’t know how many of us would be here. So I think that is a great challenge. (...) Also because without the COP framework, we need to get to the real political discussion about the political common ground of the coalition and that is a bit tricky. And (...) another*
Thus, in line with observations in previous studies (e.g. Bandy & Smith, 2005; della Porta, 2007; Reitan, 2007), the current study shows that summits are important spaces where such challenges can be overcome. They open up resources for expensive transnational mobilizations (which is especially important for resource-poor groups from the Global South), they offer a specific time and space to address an elusive issue, and they offer a common target around which movements can unite (even though the latter is, as we have seen, highly debated). Without these organizational benefits, global movement building becomes very challenging.

This is the wicked nature of the efficacy paradox: neither around nor beyond summits does it appear that movements can fully unite contradictory organizational and strategic requirements. Given the organizational challenges of ignoring summits, it is quite likely that an important part of the climate movement will continue to attend COPs, albeit in smaller numbers than at the high-profile Paris summit. Moreover, reformists who perceive no efficacy paradox have no reason not to continue attending COPs. This puts pressure on the more radical movements to attend as well, for they otherwise risk that a global moment of attention for climate change will be dominated by reformists’ views. Despite the efficacy paradox, it seems, there is a future for COP mobilizations.

At the same time, even though important difficulties are clear, the possibilities of global coordination beyond COP are far from exhausted. In fact, there are several concrete dynamics post COP21 that do offer plausible, albeit partial, solutions to the efficacy paradox, and that therefore deserve our scholarly attention. Firstly, in contrast to CC21, CJA has been able to remain organized as a network. One well-attended post-COP21 meeting was held in Amsterdam in March 2016, while a second has been planned in the following summer. Online, several working groups have been organized through an active mailing list and conference calls. It must be noted that CJA is still trying to identify what it seeks to become (an action network, a coalition, an identity...), but at least it has found a way to keep itself alive. The reason why CJA, and not CC21, has been able to continue after COP21, is at once also its limitation, however: as a mainly European, radical action network, it is geographically, politically and strategically fairly homogenous, thereby reducing internal friction, but also representing only part of the climate movement. The degree to which it can contribute to a globally coordinated climate movement, may thus hinge on its ability to link up with networks with another regional, political or strategic basis. Whether it can do this remains to be seen.
The second dynamic that promises to offer a partial solution to the efficacy paradox has been a globally coordinated direct action campaign against the fossil fuel industry dubbed ‘Breakfree2016’. This campaign, held in May 2016, linked 20 direct action campaigns against fossil fuels in countries like Australia, India, Nigeria, Turkey, the US, and Germany. It appears that the fossil fuel industry offers an alternative target around which movements can effectively come together in a globally coordinated fashion. What remains to be seen, however, is whether such a dynamic can become about more than a campaign and can establish a more permanent movement dynamic. Moreover, (illegal) direct action is seen as an effective strategy to sabotage the ‘culprits of climate change’, and to show that “the political, social and economic system itself is illegitimate” (Doherty, 2002, p. 156). However, as some organizers recognize as well, it can only offer a partial solution: sabotage is typically small scale, and deligitimization begs the question of what there should be instead. Direct action campaigns therefore require coordination with other types of action, such as more policy oriented dynamics. To what degree a campaign like Breakfree2016 can establish this remains to be seen. Finally, even though fossil fuel is a key polluter, it presents only one of the challenges to climate change. The impact of agriculture (e.g. the methane from cattle, or deforestation) can have a devastating effect as well. Again, making links to other action networks seems of the essence. Hence, there are some signs that the climate movement may find ways to become globally coordinated beyond COPs, but there are clearly some challenges as well. At the same time, some of these challenges may have a good chance of being overcome. The COP21 mobilization, where groups from across the political and strategic spectrum endorsed a call for action that explicitly contained an element of civil disobedience, suggests that there might be a normalization of more radical, direct strategies, thereby opening opportunities to link the two abovementioned dynamics to a broader movement. Moreover, there appeared to rather broad consensus that the fossil fuel industry, and any support for it, is no longer legitimate (see Hadden, 2015 as well), suggesting further that a rather broad movement could possibly be united around global campaigns against fossil fuel. While much of this is speculation, it is clear that the global climate movement is currently in a crucial moment of redefining itself, and ongoing research is required to understand this process as it unfolds.
References


