

Emerging governance of climate change and COP 15: UK business perspectives¹.

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ABSTRACT

Employing a multi-disciplinary approach, this paper combines concepts from two bodies of literature. Drawing on political science and public policy analysis, the first is concerned with the notion of governance and modes of governance. The second, located within management studies and business ethics, involves the notion of corporate social responsibility. Specifically, the paper explores the roles of, and relationships between, three sets of societal actors (business, government and the third sector) in the area of climate change public policy. The paper takes as its focal point the Copenhagen summit in December 2009. The primary research conducted for this paper, a large scale postal survey of UK-based firms, collected data to answer the following questions. What role do UK-registered firms see themselves as having with regard to challenge of climate change in comparison to other policy actors? Did the surveyed firms participate in national and international climate change policy formulation with regard to COP 15 (and how)? What were their main objectives with regard to national and international climate change policy and COP 15? Were these objectives met? What were their assessments of COP 15 in terms of the content of the policy that emerged and the processes by which it was formulated? The data suggests that the majority of those surveyed were able to articulate clear objectives and had taken steps to try to shape the policy but that a significant percentage were dissatisfied with the processes and outcome of COP 15. Many of the respondents recognised a business case for a low carbon economy and preferred a mode of governance that offers a well-designed, clear, and long-term policy and legislation for investment purposes. Many pointed to the deficiencies of the governance process but acknowledge the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of reconciling so many interests.

INTRODUCTION

The wider background to this paper is provided by the broad and relatively long-standing recognition of the problem of climate change. Over the course of several decades, efforts have been made by a range of actors to combat climate change by attempting to identify the causes and find ways on mitigating its impacts. One of the most prominent devices used to address climate change is use of international level summits or diplomacy such as the summits in Kyoto in 1997, Bali in 2007, Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010. This type of mechanism has met with some degree of success, particularly with the earlier events but increasingly they are marked by diminishing returns and failed or ineffective agreements.

Whilst governments are the central actors at such events, they are also a catalyst for the involvement (if only peripherally) other actors such as businesses and the third sector. Arguably, businesses are especially pivotal in the effort to combat climate change. This is for two reasons. First, there is the direct impact of their energy consumption and production of greenhouse gases (GHGs), which makes them one of the major contributors to climate change. Second, is the indirect impact on energy use and emissions in the wider economy. Clearly, businesses have a significant potential to shape the consumption patterns of others such as consumers, their own employees, and the organisations that comprise their supply chain.

Set against this broader background, there are two focal points for this paper. The first is the UNFCCC summit held in Copenhagen in December 2009 (COP-15). The second is that provided

by the perspective of the largest businesses registered in one specific country: that is, the United Kingdom (UK). Whilst previous research (Levy and Egan 2003; Levy and Kolk 2002; Rowlands 2000) has focused on particular industries such as the oil and automobile industries in relation to the issue of climate change and other research has examined the small and medium sized businesses (Taylor *et al.* 2003) in terms of environmental best practice, to date relatively little research has attempted a broader review of large companies across a range of industrial sectors specifically in the area of climate change. Following these scholars and the leads of some useful studies into business responses to the challenge of climate change (Berkhout *et al.* 2006; Hoffman 2005; Kolk and Pinkse 2004 and 2005), the top 250 UK-registered firms covering a wide range of industries were selected for the survey discussed in this paper. The UK data will provide the benchmark against which evidence from a longer-term international comparative study encompassing other EU and non-EU states can be compared.

In terms of the discipline-based conceptual frameworks used, the paper combines theoretical and conceptual frameworks from a two major disciplines. The first is management studies. Within that field, the paper particularly draws on business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature. The second main body of scholarship that underpins this paper is political science and within that area it makes particular use of concepts located within public policy analysis, governance, and interest representation. From these bodies of scholarship two distinct but connected sets of research questions are derived. From the first body, the research questions ask business managers to characterise their understanding of their firm's 'social' responsibilities and describe how they perceive CSR to be connected to the issue of climate change. Specifically, the research questions devised for this research are:

- Do the business managers surveyed see action on the part of the firm to combat climate change as an element of their CSR?
- What role do they think business organisations should play in relation to combating climate change?
- Do they think that public sector organisations have the primary responsibility for combating climate change and which public sector organisations do they think should play the most important role?

From the second body of literature, the research is concerned with the development of governance, public policy and business involvement in the development of climate change policy. The questioning was intended to locate business organisations in relation to climate change and other policy actors. The following specific questions were posed to the business managers:

- Did the surveyed firms participate in national and international climate change policy formulation with regard to COP 15 (and how)?
- What were their main objectives with regard to national and international climate change policy and COP 15? Were these objectives met?
- What were their assessments of COP 15 in terms of the content of the policy that emerged and the processes by which it was formulated?

The research conducted to answer the questions above consists of a two-part approach. The first element comprises large-scale postal surveying of UK registered firm, which itself was divided into two stages. The second element entails interviewing key policy actors. The first postal survey (2007-09) was designed to elicit the views of senior UK business managers in relation to CSR and its links (or otherwise) to climate change. Subsequently, during the second stage of the postal surveying (2010-ongoing), senior UK business managers were specifically questioned about COP-15. In parallel, with phase two of the postal surveying, the process of interviewing key business managers was also initiated. Given that the data collection process is still in progress, the results presented in this paper are of a preliminary nature.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. Section 1 establishes the underpinning concepts and analytical frameworks employed in this paper. Section 2 reports and discusses the empirical findings from the UK postal surveys. The paper closes with conclusions and future research plans.

UNDERPINNING CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS

Two main bodies of scholarship underpin this paper. The first is management studies. From within that field the paper particularly draws on business ethics and CSR literature. The second main body of research and publication that provides the foundations for this paper is political science where concepts and frameworks associated with the study of governance, public policy analysis, and interest representation are exploited. We turn first to relevant CSR and business ethics literature.

*Corporate Social Responsibility*²

From the outset, it ought to be acknowledged that one of the enduring preoccupations of the academics (and practitioners) located in this field has been one concerned with terminology. Whilst, this author has no intention of being delayed here by this debate, it ought to be noted that there are multiple terms in use that more or less equate to 'CSR', ranging from 'corporate responsibility' to 'responsible business practice' to 'corporate citizenship' (Fairbrass et al 2006; O Riordan and Fairbrass 2008). Given that the term 'CSR' is one of the most commonly used, it is the one adopted for this paper.

Not surprisingly, given that there is a lack of universal agreement about terminology, 'CSR' is a contested concept that encompasses a range of definitions. These include a rather narrow conceptualisation that traditionally treats profit maximisation as *the* primary purpose of business activity (Friedman 1970; Davis 1973), sought with a view to rewarding the owners of business organisations in preference to other stakeholders. Crucially, in recent years, this orthodoxy has been challenged as part of an increasingly lively debate about CSR. In effect, the deliberations about CSR raise fundamental questions about the purpose and goals of business

² Scholarship concerned with CSR and business ethics may be seen as a sub-set or an extension of strategic management research (Lockett et al 2006; Visser et al 2006; Windsor 2006). It can also be viewed as a distinct discipline in its own right with its own particular disputes, concerns, methods and concepts.

organisations, their role in society, and their relationships with other societal actors (Carroll 1979 and 1999; Fairbrass 2011).

Conceivably, the notion of CSR implies that businesses can (and should) have a wider duty to society than merely the ‘economic’ (such as producing rewards for owners) and that businesses may need also to be mindful of the ‘social’ and ‘environmental’ impacts of their behaviour aiming to minimise adverse effects and maximise benefits (WBCSD 2002; Acutt et al 2004). In other words, the broader views CSR as a mirrors-image of the concept of sustainable development or sustainability (WCED 1987), which encompasses three pillars: the ‘social’, the ‘economic’ and the ‘environmental’. This paper eschews the narrow definition of CSR and favours the wider one.

A logical extension of this line of argument is the proposition that businesses may also have *equal* obligations a wide range of internal and external stakeholders (Clarkson 1995; Donaldson and Preston 1995; Freeman 1984, Steurer et al 2005; Steurer 2006) including employees, customers, suppliers, government, civil society organisations, and local communities along with the owners of the business, and that businesses should seek acknowledge, address, and ‘balance’ these potentially conflicting commitments.

Despite making little real progress with regard to the conceptual and definitional debates referred to above, business ethics scholars have made other important recent advances. Amongst the most noteworthy recent developments in the field is research underpinned by ideas from political science and public administration literature (Fairbrass and Zueva-Owens 2011) that has focused on governance. For example, one recent impressively wide-ranging survey of CSR policy in the EU, which has roots in earlier work (see for example, Moon 2004; Matten and Moon 2005; Midttun 2005), focuses very much on the role of government as a driver for private CSR policy and practice (Albareda et al. 2006 and 2008; Lozano et al. 2008). It is research that exploits and develops the notion of ‘relational governance’. Other significant work in this vein focuses particularly on the role of NGOs (see Doh and Guay, 2004 and 2006; Doh and Teegan, 2002). In other words, there is already a developing stream of research that combines business ethics and political science governance and public policy literature and provides a precedent for the sort of combined approach adopted for this paper.

Political science: Governance, Public Policy Analysis and Interest Representation

A second major body of literature that supports this paper is drawn from the discipline of political science. Within this extensive and well-established body of scholarship, the work conducted for this paper particularly draws on the literature concerned with governance, public policy analysis, and interest representation.

The term ‘governance’ (Pierre 200; Kooiman 2003; Pierre and Peters 2005; Rhodes 1997 and 2000) emerged more than a decade ago in political science discourse, becoming widely used among scholars and practitioners alike (Fairbrass 2003). It has increasingly displaced the term

'government'³, although the two words should not be regarded as synonyms (Rhodes 1997; Rhodes 2000, 54). Despite, or perhaps owing to its growing popularity, the term governance is a contested one. Divers definitions abound. Even a relatively limited survey reveals quite a wide range of usages. For example, Rhodes (1997 and 2000) noted six or seven possible applications for the term governance. Crucially, building on Rhodes, this paper sees 'governance' as a phenomenon that:

"...blurs the distinction between state and civil society. The state becomes a collection of interorganizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor to steer or regulate". (1997, 57)

In other words, this implies that research into governance could perform a useful function by examining the roles of, and the relationships between, the state and non-state actors. Or, as is more commonly characterised in political science 'governance' literature and business ethics 'relational governance' literature as referred to above, the research examines governance seen as the interaction between three identified groups of actors: the public, the private, and the third sectors⁴. It is argued that it is the interaction between these actors that 'steers' public policy. See Figure 1.

-----insert figure 1 about here-----

Effective research into governance (or relational governance) demands answers to questions about who is involved in policy making (which actors participate), how the actors participate (via what mechanisms and processes), and to what effect (what are the policy outcomes). These questions overlap with those posed by public policy analysts, whose research explores the mechanisms surrounding public policy making, dividing it into a largely (and arguably artificially) sequential process of agenda-setting, policy formulation and policy implementation and which also places a particular emphasis on (policy) actors.

It should be noted at this point that whilst the state (government or the public sector) has traditionally enjoyed the most dominant role in public policy making, a number of forces such as globalisation and privatisation have led to the decline of the state as the most authoritative source of public policy (Fairbrass and Zueva-Owens 2011). For a number of decades (in Western Europe and other industrialised countries at least), individual businesses and their collective representative bodies (e.g. trade associations) have been some of the most weighty

³ The term 'government' is generally used to refer to the exercise of control and influence through law and coercion over a particular group of people formed into a state. The term 'state' is therefore wider than government, embracing an array of institutions beyond those responsible for policy making and administration such as government departments.

⁴ The terminology on this area is also rather extensive and potentially obfuscating. In contrast the public sector (or government or governmental bodies) and the private sector (or business), the third sectors is variously referred to as civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or voluntary sector.

actors in public policy making. They possess considerable resources and the power to significantly shape the content and direction of public policy (Fairbrass 2003). Raising and discussing questions about the role of firms in public policy making shifts the focus of this paper to the notion of interest representation (for seminal works see Grant 1989; Greenwood 1997; Mazey and Richardson 1993 and for a more recent important contribution see the Coen (2007) Special Issue) as we are led to explore what interest representation activities the surveyed UK firms undertook prior to COP-15 in order to shape international climate change policy.

In the next section of the paper there is a brief account of the research process and an analysis of the data that resulted from the research using the concepts outlined in this section above.

METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

A period of documentary analysis preceded the large-scale postal surveying conducted/in progress and in-depth interviewing. Selective results of the postal surveying are presented below.

The postal surveying was conducted as a two-stage process. In the first stage, the survey was targeted at the largest 250 UK-registered firms (with repeated mailings between 2007 and 2009). This resulted in seventy-one replies (a response rate of 28.4%) of which 54 replies were useable (21.6%) and seventeen (6.8%) were nil replies. Building on CSR/business ethics and governance literature, the first postal survey was intended to gather information about business awareness of, and attitudes towards, climate change and corporate social responsibility. Exploiting concepts and theoretical frameworks drawn from political science literature associated with governance, public policy analysis and interest representation, a second large-scale survey was initiated in 2010 which built on the earlier survey and posed a different set of questions. It is, as yet, incomplete. The same 250 UK registered firms were contacted as for the first postal survey. By the summer of 2011, forty-three replies had been received (17.2%) of which twenty-five (10%) were useable and eighteen (7.2%) were nil replies. The second survey posed questions about business participation in climate change policy formulation, their objectives, and their assessments of the policy and policy-making processes.

Postal Survey 1: Key Results

Business managers were asked if they perceived climate change to be a major economic, social and environmental problem. All fifty-four (100% of the respondents) confirmed that they supported this view. When asked whether they saw action to combat climate change as part of the corporate social responsibility of a business organisation, the overwhelming majority (93%) answered in the affirmative. In many respects these responses were predictable but nevertheless they provide useful background to the attitudes of the business managers surveyed. The views are further illustrated by the following statements provided in response to one of the open questions on the questionnaire. One respondent commented that:

"The energy industries and other industries account for over half of CO₂ emission. Therefore, industry must play its part." (UK091, 2007-09)

Delving further into the issue of the role of business organisations in relation to combating climate change, in subsequent questions the respondents were asked to assess the part that should be played by business. The results show that there was an almost even split between those who see businesses as playing a leading role (48% of the respondents) and those who think that businesses should play a partnership role (43%) with other policy actors. Only 7% stated that they thought that businesses should play a 'supporting role'. See Table 1 for further detail. This suggests awareness on the part of the business managers of the potential among business organisations for decisive action in relation to combating climate change.

-----Insert table 1 about here-----

A justification for (UK) business organisations for adopting a leadership role is reflected in the next observation offered by one of the respondents:

"Large corporations are particularly well-placed to combat climate change on two fronts. They have considerable opportunities for reducing GHG emissions arising from their own activities and energy consumption. In addition, by investing in and marketing energy efficient products [...] they have an opportunity to influence the emission arising from consumer activities." (UK076, 2007-9)

Similarly, an argument that supports partnership with others, particularly with government, can be observed in the statement that follows:

"Both business and government need to work together in establishing national government policy in support of a low carbon economy and business needs to find ways to assist society in moving to this low carbon economy." (UK061, 2007-09)

When asked about the role of other policy actors, specifically government or public bodies, the majority of the respondents did not think that public authorities (e.g. central government) should have the primary responsibility for combating climate change. Over half (54%) stated that they did not think that the public sector should have such responsibility compared to a lower figure of 37% who thought that public authorities should have primary responsibility. This implies that the businesses believed that others, presumably themselves, should take primary responsibility for combating climate change. See Table 2 for details.

-----Insert table 2 about here-----

Subsequently, follow-up questions asked about the ranking of public authorities in terms of their potential to combat climate change. The results indicate that most business managers surveyed thought that 'national government' were the most important in terms of combating

climate change (ranked at 1.9 where 1=most important and 5=least important) compared to international bodies such as the UN, the EU, and local government. See Table 3 for details.

-----Insert table 3 about here-----

In summary, the data collected via the first postal survey indicates that UK registered firms do regard climate change as a serious issue and most perceive it to be part of their CSR. Most indicated that they see themselves as having a leading or partnership role to play, presumably in conjunction with the national government. Having established these not unsurprising patterns, the research conducted then proceeded by focusing the questioning on COP-15 in the second postal survey.

Postal survey 2: Key results

Exploiting governance, public policy, and interest representation literature, as part of the second postal survey, firms were asked to state whether they had participated in national and international climate change policy formulation prior to the COP 15 meeting in Copenhagen. Of those that have replied to date, the majority had made contact with the UK government (66%) compared to lower figures for contact with EU level public bodies (33%) and the UN (33%). Where the respondents did target the UK government, not surprisingly, the most often named government department was DECC (33%) followed by DEFRA (16%). A similar pattern emerged in terms of the EU, in so far as those that contacted EU level bodies focused on DG Environment within the European commission. When contact was made at the national level, more direct contact whereas contact with the EU and the UN tended to be via European or international trade associations. These findings confirm previous research concerning public policy formation and interest representation (see for example, Fairbrass 2003).

As part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to set out their main objectives with regard to COP 15. In summary, respondents tended to give one or more of the following objectives. First, they wanted to acquire or develop their own knowledge and understanding of the policy area. Secondly, they expressed a desire to shape policy. Third, they wrote about wanting to achieve clarity in the policy/legislation. Here several mentioned that they wanted to see well-designed legislation with a binding agreement and certainty for long-term coming out of COP-15. Finally, a frequently expressed aim was to demonstrate their support for CC policy.

Two respondents wrote of their objectives in the following terms. They wrote of a desire to:

“...ensure [that the] government appreciates the need for long-term certainty in the policy/regulatory framework” (UK75, 2010)

And,

“...ensure consistent and effective regulation and legislation” (UK182, 2010)

When asked whether their objectives were met there was a mixed response. Those who did achieve their objectives accounted for 16% of the completed questionnaires and 21% accounted for those who did not achieve their objectives. When asked to analyse why they had or had not achieved their objectives the following responses are very illuminating. Where respondents failed to achieve their objectives one very striking response was given. Their failure was attributed to:

“...a lack of [a] coordinated approach by government agencies...a lack of specific industry focus by agencies...and mixed messages/duplication of messages” (UK49, 2010)

By contrast, the two respondents quoted immediately below believed that they had achieved their objectives for the following reasons. In the first case, they based their success on having:

“[An] open and honest discussion with government [and that] Government in UK and Scotland [is] highly accessible (UK128, 2010)

In the second case they commented that:

“We operate effectively and have good contacts in the target organisations” (UK182, 2010)

These responses clearly demonstrate the value of well established contacts with government officials and replicates the findings of previous research (see Coen 2007; Fairbrass 2003).

Respondents were also asked to evaluate Copenhagen (COP-15) in terms of the content of the agreement and the processes by which it was reached. Broadly, the firms were highly critical of both aspects. With regard to the ‘content’ only 12.5% were ‘satisfied’, 50% had ‘no opinion’ or were ‘neutral’ and 37.5% found it ‘unsatisfactory’ or ‘highly unsatisfactory’. The following comments more fully reveal the sense of dissatisfaction. One respondent located in the energy industry saw the problems as follows:

“COP15 failed to deliver a globally binding reduction commitment commensurate with that required according to the latest scientific evidence. [The] failure to secure a post Kyoto deal undermines investor confidence in the clean development mechanism. In particular the role for such credits in the EU ETS remains unclear over the longer term. Failure to secure a deal has also increased concerns from other industries about carbon leakage. These ongoing concerns (and the prospect of lengthy periods of free allocation to address the issue) serve to further undermine the efficiency of the EU ETS. The absence of a global deal at COP15 will also make it more difficult to achieve linkage between the EU ETS and other national carbon schemes”. UK76, 2010)

Similarly, in commenting on the processes, 52% had ‘no opinion’ or ‘were neutral’ and 48% found it ‘unsatisfactory’ or ‘highly unsatisfactory’. Again, a number of respondents captured the sense of disappointment succinctly saying that:

“My personal view is that it is not necessarily the processes behind the negotiations that are at fault. It’s the unwillingness of specific governments to commit to the necessary targets that remain the challenge and I’m not clear how we address this challenge either via the processes themselves or elsewhere”. (UK120, 2010)

Other criticisms were also levelled against the process. These included the view that the process was too unwieldy, too complex, involved too many actors and that it lacked clarity and transparency. The following observations illustrate these points. Respondents noted that:

“When trying to negotiate so widely, it is not surprising that it becomes complicated” (UK151, 2010)

“The process seemed chaotic and last minute despite having had many, many months to prepare”.(UK75, 2010)

“[It was] confused, dysfunctional and lacking any transparency”. (UK128, 2010)

In summary, the data captured via the postal survey of large UK-registered firms indicates that they could articulate clear objectives and that a majority had taken steps to try to shape climate change policy in Copenhagen but a significant percentage were dissatisfied with the processes and outcome of COP 15. Many recognised a business case for a low carbon economy and want well designed, clear, and long-term policy/legislation for investment purposes. Many of the respondents could point to specific deficiencies in the governance process but also acknowledged the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of reconciling so many interests.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the results from the first postal survey indicate that all respondents saw climate change as a major economic, social and environmental issue. Most stated that they believed that firms should act to combat climate change as part of their CSR activities. Moreover, a large proportion of the firms thought that they should take a leading role or a partnership role in combating climate change rather than relying on government to take the lead. The results of the second survey suggest that amongst the firms surveyed, there is clear engagement with the issue of climate change. A majority of those surveyed were able to articulate clear objectives and had taken steps to try to shape the policy but a significant percentage were dissatisfied with the processes and outcome of COP 15. Many recognise a business case for a low carbon economy and want well designed, clear, and long-term policy/legislation for investment purposes. Many point to the deficiencies of the governance process but acknowledge the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of reconciling so many interests

Clearly, further research is now required. The postal surveying is not yet complete nor is the interviewing process. The next step will be to increase the response rate of the second postal survey to a sufficiently high figure so as to make the data more robust. Then, the aim is to complete the interviewing process started in 2010 to gather much richer and robust data about business perceptions of their role in society in relation to CSR and combating climate change. Once the research into UK business actors is complete the next step will be to undertake comparative international research.

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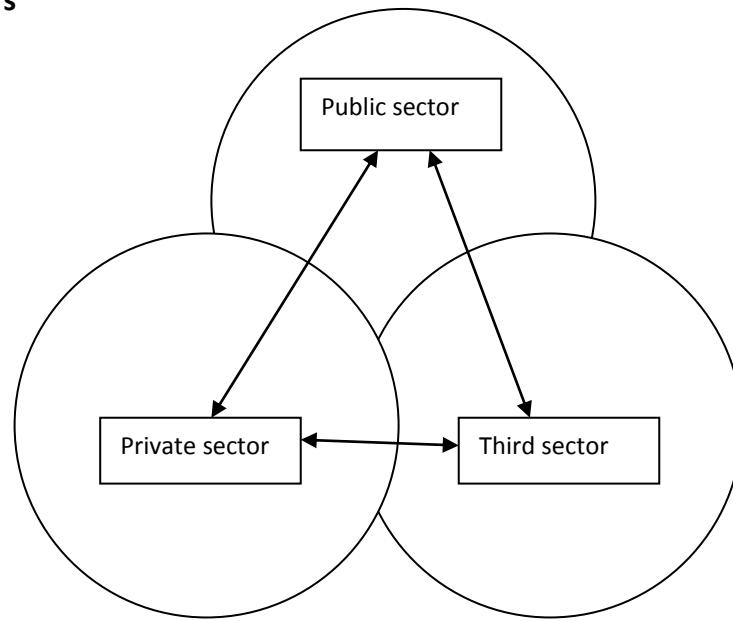
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Figure 1: Governance: Actors



Sources Author based on Pierre 2000; Pierre and Peters 2005; Rhodes 1997 and 2000

Table 1: Question: What role do you think businesses should play in combating climate change?

Role	Number	%
Leading	26	48
Supporting	4	7
Equal partnership	23	43

Source: Author's Postal Survey, 2007-9

Table 2: Responses to statement: Do you agree with the following statement? "It is public authorities (e.g. central government, etc.) that have the primary responsibility for combating climate change"

Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	20	37
No	29	54
Don't Know	2	4.5
No answer	3	5.5
Total	54	100

Source: Author's Postal Survey, 2007-9

Table 3: Question: please rank the following bodies in terms of their importance in terms of leading the fight against climate change.

Institution	Mean rank
National government	1.9
International bodies such as the UN	2.03
European Union	2.2
Local Government	3.5

Source: Author's Postal Survey, 2007-9