

How Global Governance Addresses Climate Change

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Abstract

Climate change is a persistent problem, and its threat becomes more apparent each day. It's a unique issue, in that it affects the whole world, but not equally. Historically, the countries that contribute the most to the issue suffer the least. The countries that suffer are the poorer, developing nations of the world, who lack the infrastructure to manage climate change issues. Since it is a global issue, it must be tackled globally. Many international treaties and commitments have attempted to find a solution to this problem, but the threat of it still holds. Unfortunately, climate discussions are marked by disagreement, lack of coherence and animosity between the developed and developing world. Where do these treaties lack? Why are climate change discussions marked by disagreements, and animosity? The aim of the paper is to answer some of these questions by understanding the current approaches to climate change and figuring out the gaps in them.

Keywords: Climate Change, Global Governance, International Institutions, Global Divide, Climate Agreements

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is generally defined as a significant variation of average weather conditions over decades [1]. It is the long-term impact of greenhouse gases on the climate. Not to be confused with global warming; which is the recent increase in temperatures, climate change encompasses a myriad of weather conditions, and global warming is just one part of it. Climate change brings with it irregular rain patterns, floods, storms, heat, and many more devastating natural phenomena. In the last 50 or so years, rapid industrialisation has been sustained by the burning of fossil fuels, which release large quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the air. This trapped additional heat in the lower atmosphere has affected the global climate. In the last 130 years, the world has warmed by approximately 0.85°C. Each decade becoming successively warmer than the preceding one since 1850 [2].

Climate change is an issue that affects the whole world, but not equally. Historically, countries that contribute to climate change the most are the countries that will suffer the least. The countries that do suffer are usually the developing and poor nations of the world. They are the least prepared to deal with the consequences of climate change. Climate change especially affects the global commons or earth's shared natural resources, such as the high oceans, the atmosphere, the ozone layer, outer space, and the Antarctic. Since no one country has governance over these, it becomes important to develop a

form of governance that is global in nature. Earth is an integrated, complex, dynamic system. The effect of rapid globalization is that, even though we are separated by borders, the countries themselves have grown to be linked together and become interdependent. Currently, there are international treaties in place to address climate change concerns, but they cannot be implemented since they rely on ratification by signatories. It is often the case that decisions on international climate protection are being made by countries

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who are internationally influential, and powerful. However, the developing nations, who have a larger stake in the consequence of climate change are not given the same chance to voice their views. This makes the decision-making process exclusive when it needs to be the opposite.

It is important to understand what makes these conversations exclusive, and how the international community has approached the issue of climate change so far. With that said, it is also of significance to note how the current approach is flawed, because we are still facing a climate crisis. One such analysis of weakness and strengths of international institutions with regards to climate change was done by Michonski Levi (2010) [3] where the tendency to associate specific international issues with certain treaties was identified. The study felt that it was important to understand the deeper consequences of these forums and treaties, it studied the contributions individual conventions and treaties have made, their strengths, where they lack, and the potential they hold for the future, and also looked at institutions not necessarily dedicated to climate change, but those who will have a significant role to play in the fight against climate change. This includes organizations like the WTO which can govern how and what trade can occur. Many international institutions also will be sources of training and strategy research, they can help pass down mitigation and adaptation techniques to the rest of the world since they have the machinery to provide these services. The paper thus looks at the flaws of the current system but also suggests ways to play into the strengths of these institutions which can address climate change governance.

OBJECTIVES

To do a strength and weakness analysis of the current international climate change agreements, and study potential for improvement.

ANALYSIS

Current Challenges Posed by Climate Change

One may assume that climate change repercussions will only affect us in the future, but the truth is, they are already impacting our lives. Temperatures are rising and extreme weather conditions manifesting themselves. Floods and droughts are becoming more severe, cyclones and tornadoes more regular, global biodiversity is threatened, and epidemics are becoming more frequent. The 2019 wildfires in Australia are a perfect example of climate change effects. The wildfires razed more than 18 million hectares of bush, and while it is not uncommon for Australia to experience wildfires, the magnitude of these was unprecedented. Studies have shown this was due to climate change [4]. Climate change will increase the frequency and intensity of wildfires in vulnerable areas. It must also be noted that a recent study concludes that children born in 2021 will experience more heatwaves, floods, droughts, and wildfires in their lifetime [5]. It showcases the extreme threat under which the current and upcoming generations will live due to climate change.

The most talked-about effect of climate change is the rise of sea levels, and there is a reason why this problem, in particular, has gained traction. The rise in sea levels has threatened to engulf many islands and coastal cities. As many as 70000 people are projected to be displaced from the Sundarbans [6]. The Maldives could disappear by the end of the century [7]. These direct consequences will have a myriad of indirect consequences, food security will suffer as the environmental conditions will not be suitable for crops. As more countries are submerged what the world will face is a global migration crisis resulting in "Climate refugees" or "environmental migrants". These will be people forced to leave their countries due to changes in the local environment. Between 2010 and 2011 alone, more than 42 million people were displaced in Asia and the Pacific, due to storms, heat waves, droughts, etc. [8].

Institutions and Treaties on Climate Change

Over the years many international initiatives have been introduced to deal with climate change. Since the threat is to all nations, the topic has been brought up, debated, and discussed in several

international forums, both formal and informal. It all began with the UN Scientific Conference, of 1972 which came to be known as the First Earth Summit. The summit adopted a declaration that raised the issue of climate change for the first time. It spelled out principles for the preservation and enhancement of the human environment and contained an action plan. It warned governments, asking them to think about activities that could lead to climate change.

By 1990, strides were being made to raise awareness about the effects of climate change, these were advanced by the World Climate Conference. At the conference climate change was recognized as a global problem of unique character which required a global response. The urgency for more assertive international action was felt and the UN General Assembly convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or the 'Earth Summit. This established a new framework for international agreements to protect the integrity of the global environment. It was responsible for a significant event, that is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [9].

Signed in 1992, the UNFCCC acts as the foundation for climate agreements. It was ratified by 197 Nations. It focused on the enhancement of the resilience of ecosystems. It endorsed the idea of "common but differentiated responsibilities" in the climate context. This meant that the developed countries were to take the lead in the combat against climate change, and developing countries will follow suit according to their capabilities. The principle focuses on equity in climate responsibility, and acknowledges the different capacities of the countries. It was designed as a way to support future agreements about how to respond to climate change.

Like the UNFCCC, the Vienna Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer was also a framework convention. Taking effect in 1988, this was the first convention to be signed by all the countries involved. The convention addresses ozone depletion and showed the willingness of the countries around the world to do something about it [10]. It did not ask the countries to take any concrete actions to control ozone depletion. The convention, however, led to the signing of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in 1987, under which developed countries were required to begin eliminating CFCs (Chlorofluorocarbons). It was eventually amended to control the production of new chemicals and to create a financial mechanism that would enable developing countries to comply with its provisions.

The breakthrough in climate change initiatives came in 1997 with the Kyoto Protocol. Born from the UNFCCC, the Kyoto protocol was perhaps the most influential climate change action in the international sphere. It came into force in 2005 and aimed at reducing the overall emissions of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases by industrialized countries. The protocol only binds developed countries and follows the "common but differentiated responsibilities" principle by placing a heavier duty on them, as it recognizes that they are responsible for the current high levels of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere [11].

The Paris agreement of 2015 is a historic climate change initiative that was also made possible due to the UNFCCC. It set out long-term goals to guide nations. These include mitigating climate change, adapting to its impacts, and providing financing for developing countries to fight against it. It is a legally binding treaty and includes commitments from all countries. It reviews the progress of each country every five years. Its long-term goal was to keep the increase in global temperature below 2°C and reach net-zero emissions by the mid-21st century.

Problems with Current Approach ***Lack of Consensus and Coordination***

Unfortunately, climate change treaties are imperfect, and often ineffective in fighting climate change. The UNFCCC for example focuses on sustainable growth, particularly in developing nations.

These nations have less stringent rules and reporting, making it difficult for them meet these goals. International corporation exists in the treaties, not in the data. The climate change conferences and conventions lack coherence and coordination. Countries have differing issues, needs, and approaches and they struggle to produce a consensus or set a worthwhile target. The approach that is used is the “nothing is agreed to until everything is agreed to” approach, which means even smaller manageable goals are not set in the relentless pursuit of larger goals. Instead of looking for the best solutions, countries look for the lowest common denominator.

It is difficult to make countries agree to all aspects of a treaty. Certain countries can agree to aspects of an agreement, and it may not be feasible for them to agree to all areas of it. Compelling a developing country to agree to a vast set of goals is unrealistic and less likely to be enforced [12].

Binary Divide

The binary divide of developing and developed routinely utilized by the treaties is insufficient. Not only does it create a split and animosity between the two groups, but it also classifies countries inaccurately. The categorisation of ‘developing and developed’ or the “global north and global south” was made in the 1990s, since then changes in incomes and capacities of countries has not been accounted for [13]. India and China are fast industrializing nations, whose emissions are comparable to the USA, yet they are classified as developing nations. Further Saudi Arabia and Singapore are high emission and high-income countries, which are also technically “developing nations”. The disagreements noted in climate change discussions often revolve around how priorities are to be set between nations, and who is to be blamed for climate change. The blame game prevents actual issues to be discussed [14].

Incomplete Action

Certain treaties and conventions are not done justice to as they were only meant to be a framework or a starting point to build on. Forums such as the G8 and the UN Environmental Program have been great for discussion, but no binding decisions have come out of them. They are useful in setting up policies but not much more. The Paris Agreement, for example, was recognized as not enough even when it was made, “It was only a first step, and the expectation was that as time went on, countries would return with a greater ambition to cut their emissions [15]. The agreement itself contains a mechanism for increasing ambitions.

Inclusion of Private Sector

Climate change is too broad and all-encompassing to only require action from governmental bodies. The cooperation of the private sector is required. Strategies need to account for commercial companies since they are often the most polluting. Treaties are barely binding on nations; it is almost impossible for an international treaty to bind a private company that does not want to be regulated. Regulation in the private sector is only possible through governments. One might argue that the Paris Agreement binds private players, but their inclusion is voluntary [16]. There needs to be a fiduciary consequence of polluting on the companies.

Scope for Improvement

Financing is integral to climate action. Less developed nations are not equipped to manage the consequences and need support through technology transfer and financial aid. It is at this juncture the involvement of other international organizations like the World Bank and IMF becomes crucial. Further conventions can be used to formulate a mechanism, but they have a hard time convincing donor states to contribute financially [17]. The funding and financial strategies has to be inclusive of private entities and focused on long-term goals, since most of the climate change focuses on what to do about the current damage, financing is a sphere where innovations for the future can be seriously considered [18].

Climate change needs to become more inclusive, vulnerable communities must have a say in climate change decisions since they are ultimately the ones who will suffer the most. Climate change

conversations need a wider perspective. Any innovation of policy change has to be tailored to the needs of the local communities. Inclusion also means all sectors have to work in harmony to tackle climate change. The nature of global commons is such that policies of one country are susceptible to that of other countries, to reduce dissent, policies have to be guided by human rights. The effects of climate change will increase migration, and a global partnership is required. This would involve conceptualizing an international policy-making framework, which cuts across all organizations and decision-making entities, and where the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental) are integrated in a coherent and balanced manner, while also strengthening political engagement and governance within each of the dimensions and governance pertaining to the financing of sustainable development [19].

Having no one in charge makes accountability in the international space difficult, but it allows us to experiment with solutions and adopt the ones that work. Since most of the emissions are attributable to a small group, instead of trying to find international coherence, it may be feasible to work in small groups. Having a treaty between only the biggest emitters may work better than the totality was working [20].

Just because international forums are not fully effective right now, does not mean they are futile, they provide analytical data, provide policy frameworks, and can assist countries with technical training. The full possibility of these forums is not realized due to a unidimensional approach about their potential [21]. We do not need new international forums; the current forums already have the capacity and the membership needed to manage climate change.

CONCLUSION

Climate change is an issue that has taken centre stage and the corporation of the international community is needed to curtail it. Due to lack of guidelines defining governance in the international space, who will rule climate action becomes ambiguous. Thus, it is important to find areas where countries can cooperate and set realistic goals which can be achieved.

The private sector has to be roped into the climate agenda through national policies, and penalties. Climate change has to become a fiduciary duty for the private sector, to take it seriously. The issue is too large to be left to nation states alone. The international environment is an amalgamation of international bodies, states, and, private players, each has to play their part. The private sector can be a great contributor in the innovation and inventions aspect of mitigating climate change. The international bodies have expertise in policy frameworks, and states dealing with consequences of climate change teach adaptation techniques to the rest of the world. The chance to win the fight against climate change becomes higher when the all the actors work in harmony with each other.

The divide of developing and developed needs to be modified in such a way that countries don't feel as though they are at loggerheads with one another and forget the bigger picture. Only one part of the world cannot take decisions about something that effects all. The discussion of climate change governance should be led by communities who are already facing the brunt of the issue, or those who will face it in the near future.

It is also important to remember that other issues cannot take a backseat, just because climate change has taken the limelight. Developing nations especially need to continue working on issues such as poverty alleviation, education, development etc. Climate change is not just a physical issue, it has political and ethical aspects which are far reaching.

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