

Climate Change and Global Governance

So after all the discussion last week on the humanist, economic, and domestic politics aspects of climate change, we needed to look at the international, or system level, aspects of this issue.

Climate change mitigation requires action at the international level, primarily in the form of cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. This in turn requires some kind of international consensus or agreement between states. So why has attaining such an agreement proved so difficult, and why has the record of implementation been so spotty?

Economists, political scientists, and specialists in international relations are fond of explaining how progress in global governance is obstructed by several obstacles.

First, governments exist in a competitive international environment, and as a result governments are concerned with relative gains in power and economic advantage. The competition between states for economic and strategic advantage makes them reluctant to sign agreements that threaten their economic competitiveness or their diplomatic or security interests.

Second, it is difficult to secure an agreement among many states which possess many divergent interests. As a result, any negotiated agreement or treaty between states is the product of the lowest common denominator among the participants. Of course, when everyone has to agree on a course of action, that course of action may wind up looking inadequate with respect to the problem, because it was a product of whatever consensus could be achieved. The alternative is to reach no agreement at all (which does happen!)

Third, there is the eternal problem of compliance and enforcement. Governments may sign agreements but then fail to live up to their commitments. Who punishes them? In a world with no overall government, no police force, no judiciary (apologies to the very limited World Court) and no prison, enforcement mechanisms are weak or nonexistent. The only enforcement mechanisms that exist are ones negotiated into an agreement or treaty - which are usually rather insipid - or international and domestic condemnation, which can be formidable but also can be resisted by committed governments.

Fourth, domestic politics drive government negotiation positions and the priorities of government at home (such as economic growth and employment). The vulnerability of governments to electoral politics and the scheming of coalition partners can often be important factors driving the positions governments take in international negotiations.

Finally, we have to respect that fact that science and social phenomena often move faster than the instruments of global governance. As soon as a consensus on a problem is finally forged, strategies and responses defined, an agreement negotiated, and implementation initiated, what happens? The science or social phenomena evolve or change, and new or supplemental or follow on negotiations have to begin again.

International climate mitigation efforts are a good example of the Collective Action Problem, a noted phenomenon in the social sciences and humanities. This is a situation in which everyone (in a given group) has a choice between two alternatives and where, if everyone involved chooses the alternative act that is Individually Rational (IR), the outcome will be worse for everyone involved than it would be if they were all to choose the other alternative (i.e., than it would be if they were all to choose the alternative that is not IR).

In international climate change mitigation efforts the problem takes the form of governments pursuing Individually Rational interests (based on economic competitiveness, for example) and not signing or failing to implement GHG emissions agreements and all being worse off because of ongoing global warming.

One way to illustrate the collective action problem is to use the famous Stag Hunt analogy used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Said Rousseau: “If it was a matter of hunting a deer, everyone well realized that he must remain faithful to his post; but if a hare happened to pass within reach of one of them, we cannot doubt that he would have gone off in pursuit of it without scruple...” I hope everyone understood my doodles on the white board when I illustrated this visually. I need to work on my stag and hare anatomy, obviously.

Then it was time to talk about what has actually been done on the international level on the issue of climate change.

International Climate Change Responses

The First World Climate Conference was held in 1979 (Geneva). In 1998 the IPCC was formed by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The mandate of the IPCC was to “assess the state of existing knowledge about the climate system and climate change; the environmental, economic, and social impacts of climate change; and the possible response strategies.” It is worth noting that the IPCC itself does not conduct research; it synthesizes and summarizes research done across the world.

In 1990 the IPCC released its First Assessment Report, which warned of the threat of global warming and the need to act. The Second World Climate Conference held in 1990 called for an international treaty on climate change. And if you are going to have a summit to negotiate a climate change treaty, why not have some beach access while you’re at it? And so, off to...

Rio!

So here we are at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (otherwise known as the Earth Summit) in Rio De Janeiro in 1992. It was at this conference that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed and later came into force in 1994. It was the first effort to establish international commitments to reduce GHG emissions to levels consistent with climatic stability and economic development. The signatory Annex I countries (the developed world, basically) committed themselves to reducing anthropogenic greenhouse gasses and enhancing greenhouse gas sinks and reservoirs. Specifically, Annex I countries were to reduce their GHG emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

Then the obstacles kicked in. Very few if any states were on target to meet their Rio commitments by the mid-1990’s. Emissions from non-Economies In Transition (read: Economies Going Into the Tank) countries were going up, not down. And new IPCC science was showing the global warming was getting worse. So more meetings, called “Conferences of the Parties” or “COPs” were held. COP 1 (in Berlin in 1995) agreed that only the developed countries (Annex 1 states) would commit to actual numerical targets for GHG emission reductions: this has had an enduring impact on climate change treaties ever since. COP 2 (in Geneva in 1996) both called for enhanced cuts to GHG emissions in the face of new IPCC evidence of global warming. So Rio was essentially a failure. But if at first you don’t succeed, then try, try again...at:

Kyoto!

So here we are at COP 3 in Kyoto in 1997. The aim was to achieve deeper emission reduction targets than those agreed to at Rio. The negotiations were pretty intense, going on for 25 hours straight at one point.

There was particular tension between EU countries, which wanted deeper emissions cuts targets, and a group called JUSCANZ (Japan, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand) which wanted lower emissions targets and wanted to include developing countries in the Kyoto protocol.

EU Europe sought deeper emissions cuts in the range of 5-15 percent below 1990 levels by 2010. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration wanted voluntary measures only with emissions limits coming into effect only in 2008. There was also contention on a variety of “flexibility mechanisms” designed to increase the ability of countries to meet their emission target without (you guessed it) having to cut emissions. These included emissions credits for changes in land use (reducing the rate of clearance of land or increasing forest cover or “carbon sinks”), emissions trading (we talked about that the previous week), and the “Clean Development Mechanism” to gain emissions credits by investing in green projects in developing countries.

Essentially, the Kyoto Protocol was a “grand bargain” between the JUSCANZ countries and the EU: the JUSCANZ countries agreed to deeper emissions than they wanted to, while the EU agreed to accept flexibility mechanisms. At the end of the day, the Kyoto Protocol calls on the 28 industrial countries to reduce emissions to varying country-specific percentages below 1990 levels by 2008-2012. So for example, the US committed to cut its emissions to 7% below 1990 levels, Canada to 6% below, the EU to 8% below, and Japan to 6% below.

And then the US Senate did something very interesting. On July 25, 1997, before the Kyoto Protocol was finalized (although it had been fully negotiated, and a penultimate draft was finished), the U.S. Senate unanimously passed by a 95–0 vote the Byrd-Hagel Resolution (S. Res. 98) which stated:

“Whereas the exemption for Developing Country Parties is inconsistent with the need for global action on climate change and is environmentally flawed; and Whereas the Senate strongly believes that the proposals under negotiation...could result in serious harm to the United States economy, including significant job loss, trade disadvantages, increased energy and consumer costs, or any combination thereof...the United States should not be a signatory to any protocol...at negotiations in December 1997, or thereafter.”

Ouch! On November 12, 1998, Vice President Al Gore symbolically signed the protocol. Both Gore and Senator Joseph Lieberman indicated that the protocol would not be acted upon in the Senate until there was participation by the developing nations. The Clinton Administration never submitted the protocol to the Senate for ratification.

Nevertheless, the Kyoto Protocol came into force on February 16, 2005 following ratification by Russia on November 18, 2004. Unfortunately, it does not look like compliance will be much better under the Kyoto Protocol than it was under the UNFCCC. So here we are in 2008 and people are now talking about...

Post-Kyoto!

There seem to be a number of tracks underway and any of these tracks may turn out to be fruitful (or not). There is still the UNFCCC track, the track of Rio and Kyoto. At the Vienna COP meeting in 2007 the parties agreed to consider emissions cuts of 25 to 40% below 1990 levels to try to hold global temperature increases below 2 degrees. We shall see if this goes anywhere after the rather poor showing of commitment at the Bali Summit in December 2007. Sure, the American delegation left with eggs and tomatoes stuck to their faces. That made some people feel better, but it did not do anything for climate change mitigation.

Another track is the US-led “climate summit” track, begun in September 2007 with 16 countries in attendance. And then there is the EU, which has announced plans to pursue a 20 percent reduction below 1990 levels by 2020, and to 30 percent below 1990 levels if other countries agree to follow suit. Note that all of these things are just plans, not formalized commitments.

We will see what the future holds. Hopefully, you now have a greater appreciation for the importance of the social sciences and humanities aspects of this global issue.