

Langara Open Student Scholar Prize 2020

Second Place Winner

Why Is It So Difficult for the UNFCCC to Do Something About Climate Change?

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Class Submitted For: POLI 1140 – Lealle Ruhl

Open Education Statement:

Education should be openly accessible. Knowledge is power and gatekeeping academia denies people the opportunity to participate. With the technology we have available, there is no reason not to share what we know. That is the best way to know more. I wrote “WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT FOR THE UNFCCC TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?” because I didn’t know why it is so difficult for the UNFCCC to do something about climate change. I am still learning, but now I know a little more. I hope that if people are able to read my paper they could use it as a piece to whatever puzzle they’re trying to put together. In turn, their finished picture might make me want to add a piece to my puzzle or even entirely rearrange it. This kind of collaboration is facilitated by open scholarship. It’s silly for us to construct these divisions when we are already so divided by oppressive structures that feel overwhelmingly out of our control. We are academics and what we should be able to easily control is sharing our work, and I would like to share it freely. What we need in the world today is to come together. Like the ongoing climate crises, an effective solution will not arise unless we can all brainstorm because these issues implicate us all. Open access is a tool that moves us towards these meaningful collaborations and conversations. Open scholarship removes some class barriers and better allows us the ability to discuss big ideas without having to be hung up on what divides us. When we are open, we allow ourselves the space to learn. We dissolve our divisions and we truly listen.

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT FOR THE UNFCCC TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE?

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03/18/2019

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established in 1992 after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro as an intergovernmental organization to address climate change. Its Conference of the Parties (COP), attended by almost 200 member states, have met annually for decades yet climate change persists, and chances to ameliorate its effects have been slow to emerge. The prioritizing of economics over environmental and social approaches reinforces the existing hierarchy that actively encourages the environmental exploitation that results in climate crises. The Global North continuously burns more than their fair share of fossil fuels, which results in rising greenhouse gases (GHG), the leading cause of climate change. Furthermore, by forcing negotiated consent of low-income countries in the Global South, the Global North recolonizes them through climate change agreements that do not adequately acknowledge these intentional power imbalances. Successive COPs work towards keeping average global temperatures within a 2°C rise under a principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, which fosters a collective feeling of progress. However, repeated failure to meet these goals because national governments and multinational corporations want business as usual under capitalism means our future is precarious.

Climate change has been known and warned about by scientists for nearly two centuries – in 1824, James Fourier first studied the effect of GHGs.¹ In 1861, John Tyndall identified CO₂ as atmospherically altering, and Svante Arrhenius first linked fossil fuel burning with increasing atmospheric CO₂ and global temperatures in 1896.² Yet climate change remains a contemporary problem, arguably the most urgent and complex ever. Less than three percent of climate

¹ Dorothy Grace Guerrero, "The Limits of Capitalist Solutions to the Climate Crisis," in *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*, ed. Satgar Vishwas. (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2018), 34-35.

² Guerrero, 35.

scientists would say the root cause of climate change is not anthropogenic.³ There have been international attempts to address climate change since 1992 when the UNFCCC was established.⁴ Although we are at COP24, we have largely talked about treaties rather than actually “adapting existing regimes and fulfilling commitments to implement long-term solutions.”⁵ Why does climate change persist when it poses an existential threat to humanity? The argument that political will is lacking assumes all we have to do is follow-through on a consensus about climate change. What consensus? Science only tells us we must transition to low-carbon economies, but not how this might be accomplished. This question is relegated to formal political processes.⁶ Governments and politicians, influenced by the massive sway of corporate interests, regard climate change primarily as an economic rather than environmental problem. That is why the Montreal Protocol was exceptionally effective compared to other international climate-related agreements.

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer was not only the first UN agreement ratified by all 197 member countries, but remarkably was achieved during the Cold War.⁷ In 1973, the effects of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) including cancer, crop failure, and ocean system collapse were first researched. Sixteen years later, the international community had agreed upon and implemented the Montreal Protocol. As of 2006, less than 5% of global

³ Guerrero, 31.

⁴ Guerrero, 31.

⁵ Carolyn Deere-Birkbeck, "Global Governance in the Context of Climate Change: The Challenges of Increasingly Complex Risk Parameters," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 85, no. 6 (2009): 1183.

⁶ David Shorr and Maayan Pearl, "Think Again: Climate Treaties," *Foreign Policy*, no. 205 (2014): 39.

⁷ Jonathan Watts, "How to Stop the Climate Crisis: Six Lessons from the Campaign That Saved the Ozone," *The Guardian*. January 20, 2019. Accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/20/how-to-stop-the-climate-crisis-six-lessons-from-the-campaign-that-saved-the-ozone>: 2.

ozone-depleting emissions remained.⁸ Why were we able to collectively phase out CFCs and other ozone-depleting chemicals, when action on GHGs is so challenging? CFCs were a simple risk.

The International Risk Governance Council (IRGC) identifies five types of risk, ranging from simple risk, which is “relatively straightforward and uncontroversial” to systemic risks, which are intricately socioeconomically entangled, “not confined to national borders and defy management by a single sector.”⁹ Simple risks, like those represented by CFCs, are single issues that can be solved with relative ease through “routine-based” strategies.¹⁰ Between 1991-2005, USD\$3.1 billion was pledged for burden sharing as per the Montreal Protocol to cover adaptation in developing countries – a small price to pay compared to the exorbitant, cross-cutting expenses of climate change.¹¹ Complex risks, like climate change, need systemic solutions which involve communication and coordination between governments, industries, academia, and civil society.¹² CFCs’ considerable risks were easily communicated through language of “ozone holes” which prompted visceral imagery of “the roof over our home planet being punctured,” whereas “climate change” seems innocuous, and to historically cold countries, “global warming” makes staycations appealing.¹³ In the midst of “politically contentious science-related debates,” the coverage of CFCs presented a clear dialogue for the public.¹⁴ Since consumers had all the context to “think and talk sensibly about public affairs,”

⁸ Jerry Patchell, and Roger Hayter, "How Big Business Can Save the Climate: Multinational Corporations Can Succeed Where Governments Have Failed," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (2013): 17.

⁹ Deere-Birkbeck, 1177.

¹⁰ Deere-Birkbeck, 1180.

¹¹ Watts, 2.

¹² Deere-Birkbeck, 1182.

¹³ Watts, 2.

¹⁴ Matthew C. Nisbet, “The Need for Knowledge-Based Journalism in Politicized Science Debates,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 658 (2015): 227.

which is ideally what journalism offers, consumption of CFCs would stop if production did.¹⁵

Furthermore, ozone depletion has an easily isolated economic solution: stop producing CFCs.

The Montreal Protocol targeted companies, specifically DuPont and Imperial Chemical Industries, to develop alternative products.¹⁶ If these two chemical giants wanted global market access, they had to adapt, and because they had a near monopoly, their competitors had to adapt as well. These straightforward changes had little effect on corporations and consumers so post-Montreal Protocol business proceeded as usual. That is not the case with climate change, which fundamentally challenges perceptions of the environment as inherently exploitable for human use. The enclosure of the Commons, the creation of private property, and the subsequent rise of capitalism is ingrained globally, complementing patriarchal and colonial power structures.

American, Russian, and Chinese world leaders reflect these ideologies and “represent fossil fuel interest, deny science and undermine international cooperation.”¹⁷ National economic interests and multinational corporate profits are privileged above all else. The UN was able to pressure companies to phase out CFCs not because politicians were smarter back then, but because capitalism was weaker and corporations had less political control through lobbying.¹⁸

Neoliberalism had not yet taken over politics. The players that are now positioned to ignore ongoing catastrophic climate-related crises are already winning, so why would they use their power to change the rules? Those rules also define what a “developed” country is. Almost always, it is a neo-colonial nation fully cognizant that they are recolonizing the Global South by unfairly overusing fossil fuels.¹⁹

¹⁵ Nisbet, 227.

¹⁶ Patchell, 18.

¹⁷ Watts, 2.

¹⁸ Guerrero, 39.

¹⁹ Guerrero, 41.

Climate change repercussions are not equally distributed, and the Global South is disproportionately affected to the profit of the Global North. Under the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” the Kyoto Protocol recognized that industrialized countries emit the most GHGs and should pay developing countries proportionate to this direct economic advantage.²⁰ Language like ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ and ‘clean development mechanisms’ (CDMs), which are flexible emissions-trading schemes, leave loopholes for participatory states to exploit. This makes deference “the most politically expedient option” despite the fact that we are dealing with “widely acknowledged and imminent crises.”²¹ Since 1992 the planet has kept cooking throughout periodic COPs, with states exacerbating our existential crises by burning fossil fuels with reckless abandon in pursuit of impossibly exponential growth. We have not reached an “international consensus on how best to finance effective responses and on burden-sharing among states to meet the cost of compliance.”²² Some suggest, if not governments, corporations should form “carbon clubs” because capitalists would then be best positioned to incentivize and underwrite climate change curbing with their immensely concentrated power.²³ While this could prevent carbon leakage and relieve low-income countries financially, corporations are structurally profit driven and inherently unable to save the planet. Corporations follow a business model that encourages ongoing emissions and taking responsibility for them would be antithetical to their monetary incentives. Furthermore, narrowing in on the financial enumeration of climate change is a distraction from how wealth is

²⁰ "What is the Kyoto Protocol?" "United Nations Climate Change, 2019. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-kyoto-protocol/what-is-the-kyoto-protocol/what-is-the-kyoto-protocol>, (accessed 28 Feb. 2019).

²¹ Deere-Birkbeck, 1178.

²² Deere-Birkbeck, 1183.

²³ Patchell, 21.

systemically siphoned up to the infamous 1%. The cost of climate change could be the entirety of humanity, yet concern lies with corporate interest under the guise of national economic growth.

Each country left Kyoto with reduced emission cut targets, but these targets were not legally binding until the treaty was ratified domestically. America refused to ratify. China and India were given a pass, arguing the prosperity their rapidly growing economies provided should not be denied due to a problem they did not cause.²⁴ Without America, China, and India, the world's heavy weight GHG emitters, the Kyoto Protocol could not be fully effective.²⁵ We are reluctant to admit everyone lives on Earth regardless of economic status or state or origin. Change is slow because effective solutions are complex. That does not mean international efforts are futile. Of course countries do not want to sacrifice their financial futures. The Copenhagen Accord from COP15 reflected these values by allowing countries to “voluntarily set their own targets for emission cuts over 10 years.”²⁶ A voluntary pledge instead of a binding collective agreement means governments can do what they can without risking being in violation of treaty obligations. It also negates the arduous waiting period for ratification and gets countries like China and India to go “further than they’d ever gone before.”²⁷ Copenhagen took cost into consideration at the expense of clear, legally binding environmental goals. The question becomes how to incentivize states and corporations to put value in the common good.

To constrain unilateral action so countries cannot do whatever they want, multilateralism has been the trend post-WWII, although bilateral agreements are simpler and allow for single states to gain more.²⁸ Clearly, although “international organizations and legal regimes are slow to

²⁴ Shorr, 41.

²⁵ Shorr, 39.

²⁶ Shorr, 41.

²⁷ Shorr, 40.

²⁸ Elena V. McLean, “Multilateral Aid and Domestic Economic Interests,” *International Organization* 69, no. 6 (2015): 98.

change, global governance is not static.”²⁹ A multilateral approach is essential to cope with climate change, however “international inequality is reproduced in multilateralism” through the “negotiated consent” of low-income countries to climate change agreements.³⁰ The Global North’s colonial violence secured an advantageous social, economic, and political standing that allows the hypocritical denial of previously colonized countries from pursuing the same unsustainable path. In the established linear hierarchy, the Global South remains the Global South. The Copenhagen Accord differed from the Kyoto Protocol not only in legality, but because it “was introduced as part of a take-it-or-leave-it package tied to unprecedented levels of finance” after a closed-door meeting between America, China, India, Brazil, and South Africa.³¹ For the 2010-2012 period, USD\$30 billion was promised to developing countries, and a subsequent USD\$100 billion per annum by 2020.³² The sentiments of low-income countries can be captured in COP15’s Tuvalu representative Ian Fry saying, “It looks like we are being offered 30 pieces of silver to betray our people and our future. Our future is not for sale.”³³ However, in the months following Copenhagen, “141 countries, representing 87 percent of global emissions, indicated willingness to associate with the accord.”³⁴ Ideally, multilateralism is about cooperation, yet this borders on coercion. Anything is for sale when it is business as usual. A backroom deal is a democratic consensus only from the perspective of above, while below, “low-income states are overwhelmingly outmatched in terms of financial resources, political influence, and negotiating capacity.”³⁵ Choices are limited by the demands of the dominant powers, but

²⁹ Deere, Birkbeck, 1190.

³⁰ David Ciplet, “Rethinking Cooperation: Inequality and Consent in International Climate Change Politics,” *Global Governance* 85, no. 6 (2015): 249.

³¹ Ciplet, 259.

³² Ciplet, 259.

³³ Ciplet, 247.

³⁴ Ciplet, 261.

³⁵ Ciplet, 267.

climate change affects us all. However, the corporate investor is impacted superficially compared to the citizen, whose whole way of life could be at stake but has very little political sway.

Under late stage capitalism, suggesting systemic change to address climate change is “seemingly utopian,” however there is no other legitimate option.³⁶ Climate change supersedes economic or even environmental issues, and is an all-encompassing social crisis. The fallacy in operating as if there is endless ability to “profit, overconsume and overdiscard” without consequence is structurally unquestioned.³⁷ In recent years, all climate-related records have been broken. In 2015, average global temperature first rose 1°C above pre-industrial levels.³⁸ Despite these red flags, we carry on. Business as usual. The submitted intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) for the voluntary Copenhagen Accord will result in a minimum 3°C rise, even if exacted precisely.³⁹ Governments and corporations benefit from business as usual and if they can voluntarily do what they want, there is virtually no accountability, despite grassroots efforts. Capitalism’s insidious ability to monetize anything and everything includes the so-called “green economy,”⁴⁰ in which nature is commodified into eco-friendly products and the responsibility of climate change is further individualized. The carbon footprint of any single citizen is utterly insignificant (unless they happen to be a CEO). Similarly, satisfaction with being within 2°C of pre-industrial global averages does not serve the global majority, most whom live in low-income countries and already have had their lives made unlivable by climate change.⁴¹ Those who still have the luxury of time to mitigate worst-case scenarios do not want to

³⁶ Guerrero, 32.

³⁷ Guerrero, 30.

³⁸ Guerrero, 32.

³⁹ Guerrero, 33.

⁴⁰ Guerrero, 34.

⁴¹ Guerrero, 37.

understand that clocks elsewhere have expired. To avoid catastrophe, we have to acknowledge capitalism is inherently antithetical to continuing to live on Earth as we have at all.

There is not enough popular acceptance of a paradigm shift from neoliberal capitalism to a system that rejects a “model of infinite growth,” condemning it as morally infeasible to meet the needs of the majority.⁴² Countries that are already rich widen that wealth gap by recolonizing low-income countries by insufficiently reducing emissions and using CDMs to shirk responsibility.⁴³ Exponential capitalist growth is not sustainable and we desperately need a system that is egalitarian and reciprocal.⁴⁴ Climate change is so cross-cutting that it hits “the economy, technology, trade, equity, ethics, security” and international relations.⁴⁵ This is the reason we are still struggling and the reason it is important to keep struggling towards a solution. Environmentally, we have to commit to drastic emissions reductions, leave 80% of known fossil fuel reserves underground, and, in producing and consuming cleaner energy, heal our “relationship with nature through building low-carbon, post-capitalist and gender-fair societies.”⁴⁶ If we come to terms with the very human need for these radical transformations, we will also have to unpack colonial and patriarchal ideologies and institutions. Obviously it is not easy to do everything all at once, which is why we still have ongoing climate crises.

Human ingenuity could solve the climate change puzzle if we could fit together all the important pieces: the advocacy of grassroots activism and nongovernmental organizations, the will of national governments, the democratic consensus of multilateral international bodies, the financial power of corporations, the understanding of scientists and academics, and the cultural

⁴² Guerrero, 40.

⁴³ Guerrero, 41.

⁴⁴ Guerrero, 42.

⁴⁵ Guerrero, 43.

⁴⁶ Guerrero, 32.

acceptance of civil society. All these pieces are at play. The UNFCCC has been trying to change the rules to solve a puzzle with only some of the shapes, which are actively distorted by the complexity of climate change and the pursual of capitalist agendas. We are so focused in on the economic angle of the picture, as we try to fit these impossibly small pieces together, we discount the possibility of playing another game: A game of sustainability in which everyone can be a player. “The goal is harmony, not growth. Without growth, the current capitalist system cannot exist.”⁴⁷

The cynicism surrounding the UNFCCC makes this body seem ineffective when it is doing all it can. It is extremely difficult to shoulder the vast complexities of alarming climate science with the current economic incompatibility with environmentalism, made so by legal precedents and neoliberal paradigms from our existing framework. The UNFCCC’s ineffectiveness is symptomatic of the dominant system that thinks humans can control nature. The bottom line is, we need this planet. Specifically. The reverse is unequivocally untrue. Ultimately, what the UNFCCC is doing is not enough to stabilize harmony between humanity and nature, but at least we are doing something. We have a very human paradox on our hands in which we know the way we want to live is possible if we cut GHG emissions, but our whole way of life has been fundamentally built on a model of emitting exponentially more. Climate change is the single most simultaneously broad and dense existential threat to humanity, but it has arisen by our own doing, so we should be able to undo it. The best test of human ingenuity will be putting our puzzle together.

⁴⁷ Guerrero, 42.

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