

How prepared is the international community to address the current environmental crisis?

Humanity has made significant progress in building scientific consensus and public knowledge about climate change. The UN Secretary General called an IPCC report 'code red for humanity', whilst a global survey of half a million people under 18 found 64% of them believe climate change is a global emergency. The Paris Agreement recognises the need to keep global temperature rise to 1.5°C, or below 2°C, to escape the most severe impacts of climate crisis.^{1,2} Yet a UN report found that even if COP26 net zero pledges are met, there may be 2.7°C of warming by 2100.³ Climate preparedness is both a full understanding of the risks of the environmental crisis and willingness to enact sufficiently ambitious policies to tackle it. Whilst the first aspect of this has improved, policymaking is lagging behind, leaving states underprepared to tackle climate change.

Collective action dilemmas are a significant issue for global climate policy. Mancur Olson outlined how larger groups of self-interested individuals tend to fail to obtain collective goods.⁴ His theory demonstrates how the international community struggles to coordinate emissions reductions policies (although it is in their collective interests), because each state lacks the incentive to pay for mitigation and adaptation as their individual contribution may not impact the overall goal - they instead free-ride on others' commitments. As a result, few countries show sufficient climate ambition. For example, the Paris Agreement consists of a series of voluntary Nationally Determined Contributions, and only 18% of global emissions are covered by 'robust' net zero pledges. Most national commitments are weak and leave the free-riding option open, as they lack a clear roadmap for a green transition, fail to include all greenhouse gas emissions and excessively rely on carbon offsetting abroad.⁵ Since no international body has authority to enforce compliance to net zero pledges or levy sanctions on climate laggards, this worsens the issue.

Olson also predicted that smaller groups suffer less from free-rider issues and are more successful furthering their interests. This leads to the 'exploitation of the great by the small', demonstrated how organised fossil fuel lobbies are superseding the widely spread interests of the majority to tackle climate change.⁶ Joe Manchin holds disproportionate influence over the US Senate and has shut down ambitious climate legislation in the Build Back Better Bill. He represents concentrated oil and gas special interests, who provided him with \$1.6 million worth of donations in 2021's third quarter.⁷ Without his support, the bill cannot be passed through Congress through reconciliation, thus threatening progress towards USA's goal of cutting carbon emissions by half by 2030.⁸

The over-representation of corporate interests is one aspect of wider difficulties faced by democracies, in their current form, to address the environmental crisis. Politicians operate on the short time scales of elections, and they aim primarily to stay in power. As such, they focus on short-term issues and avoid long-term, controversial climate policy which may face opposition from voters or interest groups. In 2018, the French government faced a fierce backlash from the gilets jaunes (yellow vests) movement after increasing fuel taxes aimed at reducing emissions. Hoping to recover short-term support, Macron repealed the policy and delayed tackling climate issues.⁹

Rising right-wing populism also curtails liberal democracy's ability to tackle the climate crisis. Leaders including Trump and Bolsonaro have refused to engage in green multilateralism due to their strong nationalist beliefs and narrative of representing those who have been disregarded by the 'corrupt' international elite. They also oppose scientific experts dictating the lifestyle of ordinary citizens. For example, as wildfires destroyed swathes of the Amazon rainforest, a globally valuable carbon sink, Bolsonaro rallied against international critics who accused him of 'ecocide', retorting that 'our sovereignty is non-negotiable', which meant Brazil had the right to do what it wanted with the Amazon.¹⁰ Given his staunch defence of Westphalian sovereignty, if Bolsonaro remains in power, it would be unsurprising if he

backtracks on Brazil's agreement at COP26 to end deforestation by 2030 using international financing.¹¹ Populist parties who are not in power have also weakened climate policy. This includes Spain's VOX and France's RN, who endorse patriotic climate mitigation and rejection of international treaties, which is inadequate to tackle climate change as a multifaceted issue which does not pay heed to borders.¹² Indeed, a study found that greater right-wing populist representation in legislature was correlated with weaker climate policies in 31 OECD countries from 2007 to 2018.¹³

It is encouraging that a few countries recognise the importance of reimbursing the short-term losers of climate policy, and strengthening democracy. Canada introduced a carbon tax to incentivize a transition away from fossil fuels, with a dividend paid directly to citizens which compensates for the higher energy prices they may face in the near future.¹⁴ The creation of climate assemblies, which uses 'deliberative democracy' to empower citizens to be involved in policymaking, is also promising. The UK Climate Assembly demonstrated that members of the public can negotiate policies which both represent different interests in society and are relatively ambitious, such as a frequent flyer levy and taxes to reduce meat consumption.¹⁵ Both policies build consensus and support for the green transition as opposed to populist retaliation. However, neither of them have been scaled up quickly enough to be effective. A prerequisite for a carbon dividend is an existing carbon tax system, however, 80% of global emissions are still unpriced, and the average emissions price is only \$3 per ton.¹⁶ Furthermore, governments have no legal mandate to adhere to the recommendations of citizens' assemblies so they may cherry-pick only a few ideas. The UK government failed to even respond to a report produced by its climate assembly.¹⁷

Perhaps the best hope for democracies is the increasing influence of grassroots protest movements. Groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for Future have managed to disrupt the status quo by raising public awareness on climate change and putting pressure on governments to take bolder action. These groups are close to involving a critical

threshold of 3.5% of the population in protests, which could cause the socioeconomic system to rapidly flip towards climate responsibility. However, this figure was calculated for 'maximalist' movements which have a clear goal, whereas demands to avert climate emergency are relatively broad.¹⁸ Also, even if a large minority engages in climate protests, as predicted by Olson, they may be overridden by well-organised interests. Whilst climate activists rallied in the streets of Glasgow, at COP26 fossil-fuel lobbyists, larger than any national delegation, sought to slow down the pace of emissions reductions.¹⁹

Whilst democracies have floundered, some have suggested moving towards China's green authoritarianism, where eco-technocrats dictate policies without backlash from lobbies or climate deniers. However, this has prevented local NGOs or activists from holding leaders accountable for their plans.²⁰ The Climate Action Tracker rates China's climate policy as 'highly insufficient', so there is little evidence to suggest authoritarianism is a better alternative.²¹

The deep divisions between developed and developing nations have hamstrung global climate cooperation. Developing nations are rallying for climate justice, a concept first outlined in the UNFCCC as 'common but differentiated responsibilities' for each country. They argue that high income countries, due to both their greater historical responsibility for causing climate change and enhanced capacity to tackle it, must shoulder the greatest burden in reducing emissions. The coalition of Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDC) criticised rich countries' attempts to set a universal net zero goal by 2050 as unjust, which is the only pathway compatible with 1.5°C warming. They have also argued that carbon border adjustments (tariffs on carbon-intensive imports) imposed by the EU are 'discriminatory' and inconsiderate of their aims for economic development.²² India, an LMDC member, backed the weakening of the 'phase out of coal and its subsidies' to 'phase down' at COP26, arguing it was unjust to expect them to end coal usage at the same pace as Western countries given their reliance on it for 70% of electricity.²³ India may have also been influenced by the

hypocrisy of fellow large emitters, USA and China, who committed to ending coal finance overseas yet recently ramped up coal production during the energy price hike.²⁴ Thus, climate justice issues are already damaging international agreements.

Climate finance has potential to resolve injustice but it has not been sufficiently mobilised. At COP26, loss and damage, a form of reparations to developing countries to compensate for the disproportionate environmental damage they face, was discussed but only £2 million was offered solely by Scotland.²⁵ However, less ambitious financing goals are also not being met. In 2009, rich nations committed to providing \$100 billion annually in green finance - a minimal amount since the IEA estimated humanity needs over \$4 trillion annually for decarbonization.^{26,27} They failed to live up to this pledge, because there was no explicit responsibility delegated to each member nor sanctions for those who didn't contribute enough funding, creating a free-rider issue. There are no standards for what counts as green aid either - whilst reported public climate finance reached \$59.5bn by 2018, Oxfam estimates that once removing non-concessional loans and equity financing, it was only \$19-22.5bn.²⁸ This leaves developed nations utterly unaccountable to poorer countries, fails to reassure them that they will be adequately supported in decarbonizing and discourages them from pursuing the already daunting task of achieving net zero alongside economic growth and poverty reduction. Since increased climate finance is a direct condition for the obligations of most African countries under the Paris Agreement, and it has also been requested by India, it is essential for climate action.²⁹

Incremental steps forward made by nations, including net zero pledges, citizens' assemblies and carbon tax systems in some countries, are inadequate to wholly rectify collective action issues and ward off populist retaliation. Countries have not enacted transformative changes, including restrictions on the impact of fossil fuel lobbies, reforms to democratic processes and significant increases in green development finance. Therefore, the international community is significantly underprepared to address the environmental crisis.

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