

Global Treaty on Climate Change: A Good Consensus is Hard to Find

Skot Rogers | Spring 2014

A good international treaty is a lot like a good chiropractor; while it's best not to have to find one at all, should the need arise, one should never settle for someone who cracks backs and twists necks for twenty-plus years with no real intention of actually curing anyone. The search for a meaningful solution to global climate change by way of international treaty in *this* past twenty years has been, figuratively speaking, quite a pain in the neck. From 1992's United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to 1997's Kyoto Protocol, to 2009's Copenhagen Accord, the global community feels the pinch, sees the need to fix...something, but continues to go about seeking treatment the wrong way. The international community is bent and cracked, looking for a one-size-fits-all solution to a problem which simply cannot be remedied by a single international policy alone. The truth is, working treaties are written all of the time. Where would civilization be without the *Convention on the Contract for the International Carriage of Passengers and Luggage by Inland Waterway*, signed in 1976? How about the *European Agreement on Road Markings* signed into law in 1957? Last but not least, who would sleep comfortably at night without the assurances of the *International Agreement on Olive Oil and Table Olives*, bravely signed into multinational law in 1986? Joking aside, meaningful treaties do exist, are written all of the time, but are simply not the most effective way

to fix something as large as climate change; that is because the concerns of all of the countries with a stake in global climate change, that is, all countries on this planet, have immensely different considerations to factor into the discussion. Shortly put, considerations on the matter of climate change go far beyond whom to sell olives to and what color to paint the street signs. The international community has failed to find a meaningful solution to global climate change by way of international treaty because of huge differences in the economic conditions, the developmental concerns, and the corporate interests of those countries.

The economic conditions of all of the member countries of the United Nations vary by such an incredible degree that it is nearly impossible to find mass consensus on treaty provisions which will deeply affect each country's finances in vastly different ways. BBC News conducted interviews following the Copenhagen talks in 2009 and the sentiment is relatively clear cut in developing nations. Ian Fry, the lead negotiator for the country of Tuvalu, a small country with a comparably small gross domestic product of about twenty-seven million US dollars per year in 2009, describes the talks stating, "It looks like we are being offered 30 pieces of silver to betray our people and our future" (BBC.com). On the other end of the economic spectrum, delegates like Xie Zhenhua from China, a country with an estimated five trillion dollar GDP in 2009 per Google's public data directory, is quoted as saying, "The meeting has had a positive result, everyone should be happy. After negotiations both sides have managed to preserve their bottom line. For the Chinese this was our sovereignty and our national interest." This isn't to say that either side is

wrong to perceive meaningful change for their country as good or bad; the fact of the matter is that for some countries, the changes imposed would come at a tremendous economic cost to them, a cost which would not be remotely felt by richer nations.

Developmental concerns are at the heart of all small economies. The fact is that the sometimes abstract goals of tenths of a degree reductions in global temperatures over decades are hard to prioritize in front of things like starting a national bank, completing a national infrastructure of roads, getting unemployment percentages down into a range considered normal for a modernized nation. Elements of the international climate treaties of the past often promise developing nations very much with good intentions, but sometimes end up leaving cracks in the system where resources can fall into the wrong places. Small countries simply can't trust the big ones to treat them fairly in the altruistic way that some of the climate treaties of the past require them to. Consider some of the details of the Kyoto Protocol of 1997. One idea was the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). In short, rich countries could help reduce global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and receive credit to offset their own pollution by providing assistance to poorer countries through funding of sustainable conversion projects in developing areas. But as climate authors on www.thinkprogress.org point out, countries getting the most out of the CDM are not those who really need the most help. As stated, "The country with by far the most CDM projects, and the largest expected reduction volume from its projects, is China. Other CDM host countries with large numbers of projects include Brazil,

South Korea, Mexico and Chile, while the entire continent of Africa hosts a few dozen projects, mostly in South Africa” (thinkprogress.org). As this scenario has played out, African countries have been largely ignored despite being promised an investment in their infrastructure. As the poorest countries have very little carbon emissions to reduce in the first place, there is not an incentive for wealthy countries to help them build sustainable systems from scratch. This only incentivizes poor countries with any hope of development to build conventional systems based on fossil fuels, begin to pollute, and only then receive aid in their conversion. This is once more, a solution which just doesn’t fit for every nation.

The worldwide spread of unbridled capitalism and “free-market” economics does not, unfortunately, require any sensitivity to the state of global environmental health to perpetuate itself. In fact, it is worldwide environmental degradation which fuels the profits of a lot of enormous companies, wealthier and more powerful than many countries are entirely. The United States and ExxonMobil is a perfect example of a pair operating with very few equivalents on the international stage. ExxonMobil lists 349 billion US dollars in total assets in 2011 according to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission website (www.sec.gov). So how are the corporate interests of this company with lobbying ties throughout Washington DC, matched in power to the corporate interests of a small eco-friendly tour guide on a tiny island nation which will be both financially and *literally* underwater if climate change isn’t remedied? Well, they aren’t. Naomi Klein discusses the power and financial backing of companies like ExxonMobil in [The Shock Doctrine; The Rise of Disaster](#)

Capitalism. She explains how a virtually endless stream of ExxonMobil profits play into the climate change discussion stating, “Large oil companies have bankrolled the climate-change-denial movement for years; ExxonMobil has spent an estimated \$16 million on the crusade over the past decade” (540). With all of the billions in private interest funneling through the United States government via corporate lobbying, and often worse - appointments of US energy secretaries with ties to oil and gas companies, USDA appointments for former Monsanto employees, unfortunately even under Democratic leaders like President Obama, what real chance is there for a fair and unbiased discussion on the future of the climate situation with small countries who come to the table with little more than a sack lunch and a plea for their country’s future?

The truth is that the differences in the countries of the international community are simply too large for a one-size-fits-all approach; there are too many square pegs and round holes. The meet, greet, and pretend-to-listen approach of the international climate discussion of late is becoming as useless and gratuitously self-perpetuating as the United State’s two-party system is; it’s just too easy to villainize the other side and then dodge the blame that comes when people realize decades have passed and absolutely nothing has been done. What *will* work, is a custom-fit approach that stems from the bottom up with the United States pioneering global climate remediation more feverishly than anything else it has ever introduced to the world, from cars to thirty-plus years of hyper-capitalism. Individual Americans on the left, right, top, bottom, middle must exercise their democratic muscle like never before

and demand a re-prioritization of US government investments away from oil and GHG producing systems, towards next-generation technologies which can be subsidized and sold cheaply throughout the entire world. Instead of letting American oil companies rack up record profits year after year while they destroy every corner of the earth at everyone else's expense, laws must be rewritten to force these companies to reinvest every penny of oil/gas profit into making renewables the cheap new norm. This model will fuel the economic hunger of other countries, just as capitalistic success always does; that will lead other countries to follow suit, eventually diverting all investment and subsidies in all developed nations from unsustainable practices towards clean energy, sustainable agriculture systems, meaningful infrastructure investments in developing nations, and yes, maybe even some *good* chiropractors to help with the back aches from all of the hard work.

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