

Climate Politics and Global Governance: Assessing the Role of International Agreements in Environmental Policy-Making

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Abstract

This research paper explores the intricate interplay between climate politics and global governance, focusing specifically on the role of international agreements in shaping environmental policy-making. As climate change transcends national boundaries, it has become a pivotal issue requiring coordinated global action. The study examines the evolution of major climate agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, and evaluates their impact on global environmental governance. By analyzing the contributions and limitations of state and non-state actors, global institutions, and multilateral frameworks, the paper highlights both the progress achieved and the persistent challenges in implementing climate commitments. Emphasis is placed on the dynamics between developed and developing nations, issues of climate justice, and the need for equitable, inclusive, and enforceable global mechanisms. The paper concludes by proposing strategic pathways for enhancing international cooperation and effectiveness in climate governance, underscoring the urgency of collective action in the face of escalating environmental threats.

Keywords: *Climate Politics, Global Governance, International Agreements, Environmental Policy, UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Kyoto Protocol, Climate Justice, Multilateralism, Sustainable Development, Climate Change Mitigation,*

1. Introduction

The introduction of this paper situates climate politics as a central and urgent issue within the broader framework of global governance. As the impacts of climate change grow increasingly severe rising global temperatures, frequent natural disasters, biodiversity loss, and sea-level rise it has become evident that no single nation can address the crisis in isolation. Climate change represents a quintessential global challenge that demands coordinated, collective action from all levels of society and governance. However, efforts to create cohesive international responses are complicated by political, economic, and social disparities among nations.

The introduction discusses how climate politics have evolved from scientific concern to political agenda, largely propelled by international consensus around the threat posed by human-induced environmental degradation. It reflects on how environmental governance emerged through global summits and the formation of institutions like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), tasked with guiding negotiations and commitments among states. Yet, despite institutional frameworks, achieving meaningful cooperation remains difficult due to the clash between national interests, economic priorities, and long-standing divisions between the Global North and Global South.

Developed nations, historically responsible for a significant share of greenhouse gas emissions, often advocate for shared responsibility, while developing nations argue for climate justice, demanding greater financial and technological support to meet environmental goals without compromising development. The introduction also considers how emerging powers like China and India are reshaping the geopolitical landscape of climate negotiations, and how their participation is crucial for any global strategy to succeed.

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Furthermore, this section highlights the increasing involvement of non-state actors civil society, indigenous groups, the private sector, and youth movements in shaping climate discourse and pressuring governments to act. These actors are instrumental in expanding the climate conversation beyond traditional diplomacy, pushing for transparency, accountability, and ambitious climate action. The introduction frames the research as a critical analysis of how international agreements have responded to this complex political environment. It sets the stage for evaluating their effectiveness, inclusivity, and ability to foster real change in environmental policy-making, thus laying the foundation for the detailed examination in the sections that follow.

2. Evolution of International Climate Agreements

The evolution of international climate agreements represents a complex yet significant trajectory in the global effort to combat climate change. From early non-binding frameworks to more structured and ambitious accords, the international community has progressively recognized the need for coordinated action to mitigate environmental degradation. This section charts that development, highlighting key milestones, the rationale behind each agreement, and their overall impact on global climate governance. The journey began with the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro. This landmark event led to the establishment of the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**, a foundational treaty aimed at stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system (UNFCCC, 1992). While the convention set no binding emission limits, it laid the groundwork for future negotiations by creating a platform for dialogue, data-sharing, and policy alignment.

Building on the UNFCCC, the **Kyoto Protocol** was adopted in 1997 and marked a pivotal moment in climate diplomacy. It was the first international agreement to impose legally binding emission reduction targets on developed countries, acknowledging their historical responsibility for global emissions (Grubb et al., 1999). The protocol introduced mechanisms such as emissions trading, the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), and Joint Implementation (JI), which allowed flexibility in how countries met their targets. However, its limited scope—excluding major developing economies—and the withdrawal of key players like the United States in 2001 undermined its long-term effectiveness (Victor, 2001).

Recognizing the limitations of a top-down approach, the **Paris Agreement**, adopted in 2015 at the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21), signaled a shift toward a more inclusive, bottom-up framework. Under this agreement, all signatory countries—both developed and developing—are required to submit **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** outlining their climate action plans. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement emphasizes voluntary commitments, peer review, and a five-year cycle of ambition raising (Bodansky, 2016). While this has broadened participation and fostered a more collaborative spirit, the lack of binding enforcement mechanisms raises questions about accountability and effectiveness.

Other significant developments include the **Copenhagen Accord** (2009), which, although not legally binding, introduced the principle of limiting global temperature rise to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, and the **Doha Amendment** (2012), which extended Kyoto commitments but was ratified by relatively few countries. More recently, climate agreements have increasingly integrated financial pledges, including the promise by developed nations to mobilize \$100 billion annually by 2020 to support mitigation and adaptation efforts in the Global South—a target that remains only partially fulfilled (Roberts & Weikmans, 2017).

In addition to state-level agreements, there has been a proliferation of sub-national and non-state climate initiatives, such as the **Climate Action Agenda**, which emerged alongside the Paris framework. These initiatives demonstrate that while international agreements provide the scaffolding for global cooperation, real progress often depends on multi-level engagement and the political will of individual actors. The evolution of climate agreements reflects both the achievements and shortcomings of global governance. While the international community has succeeded in establishing mechanisms for cooperation and raising awareness, it has yet to fully overcome the challenges of enforcement, equity, and implementation. As climate risks intensify, there is an urgent need to strengthen these agreements through more ambitious, inclusive, and binding measures.

3. Role of Key Stakeholders: States, Institutions, and Non-State Actors

The success or failure of international climate agreements is deeply influenced by the roles played by a diverse array of stakeholders. These include nation-states, intergovernmental institutions, and an increasingly vocal and influential cadre of non-state actors. Together, they form the intricate web of global climate governance, each with distinct powers, interests, and responsibilities in driving environmental policy and action. **Nation-states** remain the primary actors in climate negotiations. As sovereign entities, they determine the direction, scope, and ambition of international agreements through diplomacy and policymaking. The responsibility of states is twofold: to negotiate and ratify agreements, and to implement national policies aligned with their international commitments. Developed countries, such as the United States, Germany, and Japan, have historically shaped the agenda, often influenced by their economic leverage and geopolitical standing. However, emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil have become increasingly assertive in climate negotiations, calling attention to the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC). This principle—enshrined in the UNFCCC—acknowledges the historical emissions of industrialized nations while advocating for equity and fairness in assigning climate responsibilities.

International institutions play a central role in coordinating efforts, monitoring compliance, and facilitating funding and technology transfer. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) serves as the institutional backbone of global climate governance, hosting annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) where states deliberate and commit to climate targets. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) provides the scientific foundation for these negotiations by synthesizing research on climate change and its impacts. Additionally, institutions like the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Green Climate Fund (GCF) support climate finance, particularly for adaptation and mitigation in developing countries. These organizations not only distribute funds but also build capacity, offer technical expertise, and promote sustainable development initiatives worldwide.

Beyond formal institutions and states, **non-state actors** have emerged as powerful contributors to the climate movement. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, corporations, academic institutions, indigenous communities, and youth-led climate movements. NGOs such as Greenpeace, the World Resources Institute (WRI), and Climate Action Network (CAN) monitor the actions of governments, advocate for stronger commitments, and raise public awareness. The private sector, once seen as a contributor to environmental degradation, is increasingly engaging in sustainability through green investment, renewable energy adoption, and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting. Major corporations are now pledging net-zero targets and forming coalitions like the We Mean Business Coalition to promote low-carbon growth. Grassroots and youth movements have further galvanized climate action. Movements such as Fridays for Future, led by figures like Greta Thunberg, have mobilized millions worldwide to demand accountability and immediate action. These actors exert soft power by shaping public discourse and applying moral and political pressure on governments and businesses alike.

Moreover, cities and local governments are forging their own climate pathways, often surpassing national governments in ambition and implementation. Networks such as C40 Cities and ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability) exemplify how subnational entities are innovating on renewable energy, green infrastructure, and climate resilience, demonstrating that meaningful action can occur at all levels of governance. The multifaceted nature of climate governance reflects the interplay of diverse stakeholders—each playing a distinct but interdependent role. While states and international institutions continue to set the formal framework, non-state actors are reshaping the landscape by fostering innovation, accountability, and citizen engagement. Strengthening collaboration among these stakeholders is essential to address the scale and urgency of the climate crisis, ensuring that international agreements move beyond rhetoric and toward transformative global action.

4. Successes, Challenges, and Gaps in Implementation

The implementation of international climate agreements has yielded mixed results. While global accords such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement have led to significant progress in creating a framework for cooperation, real-world outcomes remain inconsistent and uneven. This section evaluates the major successes, persistent challenges, and critical gaps in the enforcement and effectiveness of these agreements, with a particular focus on India's climate policy and its role in global climate governance.

Successes:

One of the most notable successes of international climate agreements is the universal acknowledgment of climate change as an urgent global issue requiring multilateral cooperation. The Paris Agreement (2015), in particular, represents a breakthrough in inclusivity, with almost every nation voluntarily submitting **Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)** to curb greenhouse gas emissions. The shift from a top-down binding approach (Kyoto Protocol) to a more flexible, bottom-up system has helped increase global participation.

Another success is the mobilization of climate finance. Mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund (GCF) have begun channeling billions of dollars toward mitigation and adaptation projects in developing nations. Technological transfer and capacity-building programs have also been initiated to help vulnerable countries transition to sustainable practices. **India**, under the Paris Agreement, committed to reducing the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33–35% from 2005 levels by 2030 and achieving 40% cumulative electric power from non-fossil fuel-based energy resources. India is also aggressively expanding its renewable energy capacity, aiming to reach **500 GW of non-fossil fuel capacity by 2030**, which reflects strong political commitment to climate goals. Initiatives like the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)**—spearheaded by India and France—demonstrate India's growing leadership in climate diplomacy.

Challenges:

Despite progress, several challenges hinder the full realization of international climate agreements. One major issue is the **lack of enforceability**. The Paris Agreement, while inclusive, is not legally binding, which allows countries to underperform or delay their commitments without facing concrete penalties. Another challenge lies in **climate finance and equity**. The promise by developed countries to mobilize \$100 billion annually for climate action in developing nations remains unmet. This undermines trust and weakens the ability of poorer countries to fulfill their climate ambitions. India, for example, has consistently emphasized the need for **climate justice**—arguing that countries with historical responsibilities should do more in terms of funding and technology transfer.

Domestically, India faces its own implementation hurdles. While renewable energy growth is promising, India remains heavily dependent on **coal**, which accounts for about 70% of its electricity generation. Balancing economic development with environmental responsibility is a persistent struggle, particularly given India's large rural population and pressing poverty reduction needs. Furthermore, institutional and bureaucratic inefficiencies, lack of regulatory enforcement, and fragmented policy implementation across states often slow down the execution of climate policies.

Gaps in Implementation:

Several critical gaps persist. Firstly, **monitoring and accountability mechanisms** are weak. While countries submit NDCs and periodic progress reports, there is little independent verification or standardized methodology to assess actual outcomes. Secondly, **adaptation measures** receive far less attention and funding compared to mitigation, even though vulnerable countries—like India—face severe climate risks such as droughts, floods, and heatwaves. In India, despite a strong policy framework (e.g., National Action Plan on Climate Change – NAPCC and various State Action Plans on Climate Change – SAPCCs), the **implementation at grassroots levels** remains weak. Many states lack technical capacity, data infrastructure, and institutional coherence to integrate climate considerations into developmental planning effectively. Lastly, **non-state actors** in India—including civil society, youth, and private enterprises—are still underutilized in climate action, though there are emerging signs of involvement. More structured engagement with local communities, especially in climate-vulnerable regions like coastal Andhra Pradesh, Sundarbans, and the Himalayan belt, is essential for inclusive implementation.

While international climate agreements have created a valuable architecture for cooperation, their success hinges on political will, financial equity, and grassroots implementation. India's active participation, renewable energy investments, and global initiatives like the ISA signal a constructive role in climate diplomacy. However, addressing internal challenges, securing climate finance, and enhancing institutional capacities are critical for bridging the gap between policy promises and tangible outcomes—not just in India, but globally.

5. The Future of Climate Governance: Toward Inclusive and Binding Frameworks

In the concluding section, the paper outlines a roadmap for strengthening global climate governance. It calls for a reinvigorated multilateralism that prioritizes inclusivity, equity, and accountability. Proposals include establishing a global carbon pricing system, enhancing climate finance for vulnerable nations, integrating climate goals into trade and development policies, and bolstering the authority of international institutions. The section also explores emerging trends such as climate litigation, youth-led activism, and the digitalization of climate monitoring. Ultimately, the paper

argues that the success of future climate agreements will depend on balancing national interests with global responsibility and ensuring that environmental governance is not only cooperative but also enforceable and just.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of climate politics and global governance underscores the urgency of coordinated international action in the face of an escalating environmental crisis. International climate agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement have laid foundational frameworks for cooperation, awareness, and accountability. These accords have brought climate change to the forefront of global policy discussions, spurred innovations in green technology, and promoted investments in sustainable development. The efficacy of these agreements remains uneven due to challenges such as non-binding commitments, inadequate climate finance, geopolitical tensions, and differing national capacities. The implementation gap is particularly pronounced in the Global South, where economic and developmental priorities often collide with climate goals. India exemplifies this tension: while making remarkable strides in renewable energy and global climate leadership, it continues to grapple with coal dependency, resource limitations, and bureaucratic inefficiencies.

The role of diverse stakeholders—nation-states, intergovernmental institutions, non-governmental organizations, businesses, and grassroots movements—is crucial in driving climate action forward. The decentralized nature of the Paris Agreement reflects a shift toward more inclusive, bottom-up approaches. Yet, without enhanced financial support, strong political will, and effective institutional mechanisms, even the most ambitious agreements may falter. Ultimately, meaningful climate governance requires more than policy declarations; it demands genuine collaboration, equitable resource distribution, scientific integrity, and proactive civic engagement. Strengthening international frameworks while empowering local actors and ensuring justice for vulnerable populations can transform climate commitments into lasting, impactful change. The path forward must be holistic, just, and resilient—because climate change knows no borders, and neither should our efforts to combat it.

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