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Title: Process over action: institutional barriers to addressing climate change under the UNFCCC



Why, after 26 years of negotiations, have international institutions not solved the problem of climate change? In this time, various protocols, agreements, committees, and funding mechanisms have been initiated under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), but the threat of catastrophe still looms. Furthermore, a seemingly unbridgeable divide between developed and developing countries has become an expected and almost banal feature of annual negotiating meetings. While developed countries work to avoid the potential economic consequences of reducing their reliance on fossil fuels, developing countries argue for their right to develop sustainably and demand compensation from the industrialized world for their environmental destruction. To analyze the dynamics and potential of this institution of global governance, I utilize a combination of historical textual analysis, an examination of retellings of the founding of the UNFCCC, and observations and 26 interviews conducted at four meetings under the Convention (two Conference of the Parties meetings and two Subsidiary Body meetings).

Ultimately, I argue that the negotiations process set up under the UNFCCC is not conducive to the production of a complete and effective climate treaty. The institution's basis for legitimacy, grounded in maintaining a particular understanding of a fair process and utilizing flexible language in official texts, has allowed it to persist over time. However, I show that these same standards and expectations for fairness and flexibility have created an environment where progress is defined in terms of procedural achievements rather than substantive action toward the end goal of combating climate change. Although others have documented the inefficiencies and inequalities that plague the climate negotiations (Ciplet, Roberts, and Khan 2015; Roberts and Parks 2007; Chambers and Green 2005; Gupta 2005) a focused analysis of the UNFCCC as an institution is absent from the literature. In revealing the institutional roots of what has heretofore been a failure of international policy-making, this work contributes to academic conversations on the possibilities for effective global governance, as well as practical concerns about addressing climate change expeditiously. Moreover, it identifies potential sites for institutional transformation that can lead all nations toward a more sustainable future.