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Research Report

Can multilateralism contribute to solving the climate crisis?

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Policy Brief No. 049

Can Multilateralism Contribute to Solving the Climate Crisis?

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Can Multilateralism Contribute to Solving the Climate Crisis?

Michael M. Bechtel, Michael R. Cannon

Michael Cannon and Michael Bechtel explain how despite the history of global climate negotiations being a history of policy failure, multilateral approaches to climate policy could still be an important tool for addressing climate change, war, hunger and poverty, economic meltdowns, and public threats. Banner image: Shutterstock// Ink Drop
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For many climate activists, the history of global climate negotiations is a history of policy failure. Even the United Nations, the international organisation tasked with coordinating the Conference of Parties (COP) meetings, the most important climate summits in the world, has concluded that after over four decades of global climate policy bargaining and close to 30 COP meetings, “climate plans remain insufficient”. The build-up of frustration in light of international policy hesitancy amid rising temperatures and increasingly destructive extreme weather events is understandable. In what sense, if any, could multilateral approaches to climate policy still be an important tool for addressing climate change? If so, can we expect the same benefit from multilateral approaches to other global crises such as war, hunger and poverty, economic meltdowns, or public health threats?

Historically, not every international threat has seen effective multilateral responses. Consider the challenge of mitigating the AIDS crisis in sub-Saharan Africa in the 2000s. The multilateral approach to that issue had been severely inadequate, likely because the benefits from mitigation measures were very unevenly distributed: pretty modest benefits to countries in any continent other than Africa itself, and extremely high benefits to about a dozen of sub-Saharan nations. It was President George W. Bush who, along with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, took the lead in creating a massive bilateral programme directing multiple billions per year to those nations to prevent mother-to-child transmission and to impede other transmission pathways. Some estimates indicate that the direct aid from the US to those countries has been close to USD90 billion over the years. Even though the AIDS outbreak in Africa was a global threat, the perception that its mitigation was a more or less “localised public good” coded for multilateral efforts that were fairly anaemic – ultimately requiring a single nation willing to bear the costs of effective action.

An often-overlooked factor when contemplating the capacity of multilateral action to serve as a tool in the battle against climate change is whether participating countries’ domestic publics actually value this approach. The term “value” can be understood literally here: are individuals willing to pay higher energy prices to combat climate change if other countries pursue similar efforts? The answer is far from obvious given a series of studies indicating that domestic approval of climate action remains unaffected by if and how much other countries are doing. This, in turn, would mean that multilateral agreements are not valued by publics or, at least, that such deals would prove unable to contribute to building domestic coalitions backing large-scale climate reforms and clean energy transitions.

Additional analyses revealed some of the reasons for the appeal of climate multilateralism: publics expect such approaches to be more effective at preserving biodiversity, ensuring a better life for future generations, and distributing the costs of climate action more fairly.

In a recent study, we surveyed national samples of 10,000 voters in Germany, France, then the United Kingdom, and the United States to gauge the appeal of multilateral approaches to costly climate action. We first identified how much domestic publics support unilateral climate action by presenting a random half of all respondents with a scenario in which their country would introduce a carbon tax on their own. This unilateral approach was backed only by a slim majority: 53% approved such a unilateral carbon tax. The other random half of our respondents received a question in which a carbon tax would be introduced in their own country and in other major economies. This shift from a unilateral to a multilateral approach alone generated an 11 per cent increase in domestic carbon tax approval. Additional analyses revealed some of the reasons for the appeal of climate multilateralism: publics expect such approaches to be more effective at preserving biodiversity, ensuring a better life for future generations, and distributing the costs of climate action more fairly.

Will improved public support in response to multilateral efforts also materialise when attempting to address other international challenges such as war, poverty, and pandemics? One obvious factor will be public perceptions of the size of the benefits that will accrue from solving such problems. But a more subtle yet potentially vital factor will be whether concerted international efforts are likely to structure the distribution of costs in ways appealing to the public.

We have learned that domestic publics can and do evaluate likely allocations of these costs against widely shared conceptions of fairness. The mere threat of fuel tax hikes, a powerful tool to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, provoked the French Yellow Vests to forcefully express their political opposition against such legislation. Resistance, however, was not rooted in the fundamental denial of having to combat global warming. Dissatisfaction arose because the costs of climate action were deemed to be unfairly distributed, with a disproportionate share to be carried by those with low to medium incomes. And policy choices that conflict with fairness beliefs can, in turn, make or break the prospects of effective multilateral efforts. Promoting concerted, multilateral efforts that feature a fair distribution of the costs of action will be crucial to building domestic approval of policy action to address global warming and other international policy challenges.