

We never had Paris: Climate accords and human progress

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The Disappointment

Stephen Gardiner describes the climate crisis as a “perfect moral storm” where several factors converge to challenge our ability to behave ethically. Gardiner makes a convincing case that effective global cooperation on climate change is less likely by virtue of the problem being genuinely global and strongly intergenerational. Moreover, the crisis crosses species boundaries and manifests in a setting where our institutions are weak.

Yet, calling the failure of Paris a “perfect moral storm” implies that, but for factors analogous to the kind of freak meteorological conditions that make for perfect storms, effective global cooperation would be within reach. Gardiner’s actual conclusion is more dismal than his borrowed metaphor suggests, though, because what Gardiner describes as a perfect storm in the arena of global diplomacy is business as usual. The Paris Agreement’s breakdown is not a freak outlier. It is not a rare convergence from multiple directions of singularly bad luck. Global diplomacy failing to solve this difficult problem is *normal*. It is not preordained. It is not guaranteed. But it is predictable.

Indeed, Gardiner predicted it. For a quarter century, Gardiner has been warning us not to trust Earth’s future to leaders who have every reason to shirk, pass the buck, and posture. We never had Paris: Gardiner warned us. But we were never going to have Paris.

The Lesson

Gardiner explains why it is unsurprising that global diplomacy is not solving problems of climate change, and why the failure of Paris in particular was predictable. So, what next?

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Gardiner has a tentative suggestion (with a note that “this is not the place to develop alternatives”): namely, a global constitutional convention directed toward future generations.¹

Gardiner is not especially optimistic about this; nor should he be. One ingredient of what Gardiner calls a “perfect storm” is that no one is in a clear position to speak for, and decide for, powers like the United States, China, and India.

It is nice to imagine political actors looking past here-and-now politics and doing what’s right, no matter what the obstacles. But obstacles are real. Negotiators at climate conventions typically are under pressure to hitch climate change to other political agendas such as reparations, global inequality, promoting democracy, or trade deals. Lofty commitments to take the high road (that is, to please everybody) were always (to use Gardiner’s word) a charade.²

It matters that there is regular turnover in the offices of decision makers.³ It is easy to make a promise that a future administration will be unable to keep, and correspondingly easy to regard a previous administration’s promises as cheap talk.⁴ Expecting the process to culminate in committed “self”-discipline seems unrealistic when a downstream “self” inherits a duty to keep a promise, courtesy of an upstream “self” who, after getting all the applause for originally making the promise, seemingly passed the buck.

Carrying on

One might imagine there is nothing else to try, and infer that, because reaching global accord is our only hope, we have to try again. But what if that isn’t true? Theorists have

¹ See also Stephen M. Gardiner, “A Call for a Global Constitutional Convention Focused on Future Generations,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 28, no. 3 (2014): 299–315; “Motivating (or Baby-Stepping Toward) a Global Constitutional Convention for Future Generations,” *Environmental Ethics* 41, no. 3 (2019): 199–220; “Climate Crisis, Institutional Denial, and a Global Constitutional Convention for Future Generations,” *Social Philosophy Today* 40 (2024): 41–71.

² Interpretations of the “high road” often presuppose faith in massive-scale rollouts of unproven technologies such as bioenergy with carbon capture and sequestration (BECCS). See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change, Technical Summary* (2022), available online at https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg3/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_TechnicalSummary.pdf.

³ In the case of United States President Donald Trump, even a formal commitment by a nation’s chief executive may not be seen as binding a subsequent administration.

⁴ Even if a constitutional-level agreement were achieved, there would be a question of enforcement. Article 2 of the United Nations Charter states, “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations” (<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>). When Russia violated this provision in 2022 by invading Ukraine, other world leaders interpreted their situation as one not of being forced into action to uphold the Charter, but rather of facing a choice about how to respond. The UN General Assembly repeatedly passed resolutions condemning Russia and calling for an end to the conflict (e.g., United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1; ES-11/2; ES-11/3; ES-11/4; ES-11/5; ES-11/6; ES-11/7), but no one had the stomach for a war with Russia. So, as of this writing, Russia’s invasion remains in progress. Would a global constitution fare any better at forcing world powers like China, India, and the U.S. to control emissions?

been scheming grand visions that hypothetically would be beautiful *if only the world were of one mind*. Real solutions are not like that. So here is a suggestion: *what if we forget about climate accords?* Would we be giving up? No. We would be giving up only if there were nothing else to try.

So, does anything have a history of success? How does progress *usually* occur? What has a history of fostering it? What has a history of working?

Grounds for optimism

In 1972, Peter Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” pulled ethicists into discussions about how best to help the world’s hungry, sick, and poor. In general, world leaders did not listen. Neither did regular citizens. Neither did they get behind “Millennium Development Goals”⁵ or “Plan 2030.”⁶ Many commentators criticized such efforts as counterproductive.⁷

Yet, things got better for the world’s poor—dramatically so. Progress toward famine-proofing whole continents (starting with Europe centuries ago) did not require orchestrating an international agreement to “give to a point of marginal disutility.” When Singer wrote in 1972, over 43% of the world population lived in extreme poverty;⁸ over 13% of children died before age 5;⁹ and the average life expectancy in low income countries was just 45 years.¹⁰ Today, fewer than 10% of people live in extreme poverty;¹¹ over 99% of children see their fifth birthday;¹² and average life expectancy in low income countries has reached 65.¹³ These developments represent monumental advances—even while nothing went according to plan.

If not according to a plan, how did these miracles occur? The answer lies less in top-

⁵ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015* (New York: United Nations, 2015).

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (2015), available online at <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/transforming-our-world-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-17981>.

⁷ E.g., William Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009); Christopher J. Coyne, *Doing Bad by Doing Good: Why Humanitarian Action Fails* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013). See also David Schmidtz, *Living Together: Inventing Moral Science* (New York: Oxford, 2023): 48-52.

⁸ Max Roser, “Extreme Poverty: How Far Have We Come, and How Far Do We Still Have to Go?” *Our World in Data* (2023), available online at <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty-in-brief>. This figure is based on the World Bank’s and United Nations’ poverty line of \$2.15 per person per day, measured in 2017 dollars adjusted for purchasing power parity. See World Bank Group, “Fact Sheet: An Adjustment to Global Poverty Lines” (2022), available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/factsheet/2022/05/02/fact-sheet-an-adjustment-to-global-poverty-lines>.

⁹ Gapminder, “Child Mortality Rate, Under Age 5: Documentation—Version 11” (2020), available online at <https://www.gapminder.org/data/documentation/gd005/>.

¹⁰ World Bank Group, “Life Expectancy at Birth, Total (Years) – Low Income” (2024), available online at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=XM>.

¹¹ World Bank Group, *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024: Pathways Out of the Polycrisis* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2024), xxiii.

¹² Gapminder, “Child Mortality Rate.”

¹³ World Bank Group, “Life Expectancy at Birth.”

down plans than in decentralized forces of entrepreneurship, innovation, and reform. Recent decades have seen market systems and industrialization spread throughout formerly poor regions. Countries like China and India lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty not through altruism and charity, but sustainably—by reshaping their institutions to foster economic growth and trade. Meanwhile, researchers, foundations, private companies, and government agencies spearheaded numerous advances in medicine and public health that have combined to bring once-deadly diseases under control. Global poverty relief organizations contributed to these processes along some margins, of course, but the parties responsible for observed progress for the most part acted independently and in line with their own interests. To adapt a line from the 18th century sociologist Adam Ferguson, our miraculous success in reducing global poverty has primarily been “the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.”¹⁴

Consider an example of successful international environmental diplomacy: the Montreal Protocol of 1987.¹⁵ During the 1970s and ‘80s, growing concerns that chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were eroding the planet’s ozone layer prompted international calls for action. Initially, powerful interests in the European Community and the United States resisted these efforts, ostensibly driven by doubts about the merits of the relevant science. Yet, American producers changed their tune as they developed effective new refrigeration technology while also trying to cope with local regulatory efforts. Suddenly, U.S. companies began demanding grounds rules that would create a “level playing field” and European producers found themselves increasingly pressured to accept a deal that would phase out CFCs over time.

The demonstrated technical feasibility of eliminating CFCs was not enough to clinch agreement. Negotiators needed to navigate industry concerns about competitive fairness in global markets, less-developed countries’ concerns about losing access to legacy technologies, and conflicts over the appropriate timeline for reductions. Balancing competing interests was a major achievement. However, more fundamental was that cost-effective new technologies and bottom-up policy innovation were coming together even as the agreement’s details were being hammered out. The possibility of a global treaty resulting in real uptake reflected successes already achieved by a multitude of actors at reducing the cost of cooperation.

The unthinkable

Fossil fuel consumption is by far the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁶ If we are to cut emissions, that is apparently where it needs to happen. And to do that, technology

¹⁴ Adam Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (London: T. Cadell, [1767] 1782), 205. See also David Schmitz, “Adam Smith on Freedom,” *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, & Legacy*, ed. Ryan Hanley (Princeton University Press, 2016): 208-27.

¹⁵ See Richard Elliott Benedick, “Ozone Diplomacy,” *Issues in Science and Technology* 6, no. 1 (1989): 43–50.

¹⁶ As per EPA data. On July 28, 2025, we accessed:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20191205123907/https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data>

will have to drive the process.

Humanity has seen progress, even if not from international negotiations. After years of innovation and refinement, renewables like solar and wind are beginning to outcompete fossil fuel technologies at providing affordable electricity. Electric vehicles and energy efficient buildings are now commonplace as businesses show an increasing ability to meet consumer desires for both high performance and environmental sensitivity. Cities, states, and regional political bodies have bypassed negotiators to proactively adopt policies that encourage energy efficiency, emissions reductions, and climate resiliency, often in response to local political pressures and economic imperatives. Drivers like these explain why, despite the absence of an effective global climate treaty, per-capita greenhouse gas emissions have already peaked and begun to decline in most high-income countries, even as GDPs have continued to grow.¹⁷

One imperative, apart from climate accords, is to develop cleaner technologies and make it profitable to deploy them at scale. For various reasons, it is taboo even to look at nuclear power's cost-benefit profile. Why? Needless to say, nuclear power has downsides that would give any sensible person pause. (1) Nuclear waste needs proper handling, which includes not exposing it to capture by terrorists. (2) Monitors would need to make sure nuclear materials are not being diverted into weapons. (3) Monitors would need to make sure that entrepreneurs entering this arena are not like Elizabeth Holmes or Samuel Bankman-Fried. The science and the management would have to be real. (4) Moreover, politicians will always be under pressure to *approve* the wrong projects for the wrong reasons (i.e., to win re-election) and to *subsidize* the wrong projects for the wrong reasons (i.e., to create jobs). These are not throwaway concerns; corruption of public works projects is nothing new.

In short, a lot could go wrong. Yet nuclear power remains a low-carbon energy source with what currently appears to be unrivalled potential to make clean energy available on a meaningful scale.

We have no interest in being cheerleaders for nuclear energy. Our point is simply that we would not want nuclear energy's admittedly catastrophic potential downside to blind us to its upside: that is, it may be our best hope of mitigating a climate catastrophe that we can all see coming. If all the entrepreneurial ingenuity in the world cannot crack the real obstacles to making nuclear power safer than fossil fuels, so be it. But future generations will not thank us if we refuse to consider what may be their best hope.

¹⁷ Hannah Ritchie, "Many Countries Have Decoupled Economic Growth from CO₂ Emissions, Even If We Take Offshored Production into Account," *Our World in Data* (2021), available online at <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-gdp-decoupling>; Hannah Ritchie, Pablo Rosado, and Max Roser, "Per Capita, National, Historical: How do Countries Compare on CO₂ Metrics?" *Our World in Data* (2023), available online at <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions-metrics>.

Conclusion

If we theorize about a solution while failing to ask what would motivate people to be part of the solution, our theorizing is not entirely serious. If we want real solutions, we cannot afford to overlook the problem-solving power of disparate, self-directed actions and institutions that let people innovate without needing to seek a tortured appearance of consensus. We must not overlook real progress simply because formal agreements are not what deliver it.

What's needed fundamentally is not a better deliberation procedure, or better principles, or even a better global constitution (although of course these things would be nice if we could get them). Rather, what has a history of working is communities around the world creating, innovating, and experimenting .

Somewhere along the line, we talked ourselves out of "Think globally; act locally." But if acting locally has a history of being the best we can do, and if logic like Gardiner's helps to explain why, then that leaves us with grounds for guarded optimism even as we learn not to expect much from global agreements.

Again, histories of progress are not histories of guarantees. We have real options, but if we put all our eggs in the global diplomacy basket, it's hard to imagine any outcome other than another opportunity to say Gardiner warned us.