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Climate COPs and the Art of ‘Muddling Through’ the Ecological Crisis

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Britain’s president of COP26, Alok Sharma, ended the international climate conference with these [conclusive words](#): ‘May I just say to all delegates I apologise for the way this process has unfolded and I am deeply sorry’. In 2021 as much as today, despite the call of scientists to step up climate action, states kept ignoring the current ecological crisis. ‘Everything is fine’ has become the new COP’s motto. This deal, in a sense, showed that international climate negotiations, in times of crisis, continue to opt for an *incremental* process of multiple small steps instead of groundbreaking decisions. When Charles Lindblom published his article [The Science of ‘Muddling Through’](#) in 1959, he defined a policy process, now known as ‘incrementalism’ which, despite its 60 years of existence, is still relevant in today’s constant state of crisis. [In 1979](#), Lindblom made a step further, underlying not only the descriptive aspect of his model, which indeed performs well as describing the current policy process, but also its ‘prescriptive’ superiority: according to him, incrementalism refers to what ‘is and *ought to be* the usual method of policy making’.

This article aims to demonstrate how well this theory applies to the way the current ecological crisis is handled by the climate COPs, these large yearly gatherings of countries’ officials to discuss international climate governance, and how incrementalism has become the ‘new normal’. Especially, it will discuss if the prescriptive view of Lindblom applies: can ‘a fast-moving sequence of small changes more speedily accomplish a dramatic alteration of the status quo than can an only infrequent major policy change’? I will argue that, while an incremental approach to global climate governance is surely frustrating and limited, it is not an absurd and blind ‘everything-is-fine’ way of dealing with the current ecological crisis. I will show that it is in fact the only way forward and has the potential to get us out of this crisis – provided that an ambitious, comprehensive and rapid incremental approach is adopted.

A history of COPs, a story of incremental progress

For the last decades, COPs have demonstrated their ability to provide an addition of small changes to combat the climate crisis, yet delivering limited progress. Indeed, since 1992 and the establishment of the COPs process, we have witnessed almost 30 years of small changes for climate action. Altogether, these small changes have greatly helped framing the climate issue, improving our understanding of the climate crisis and, more importantly, bringing every country on board to fight a common issue. Most notably, after 20 years of small steps at several COPs, this process delivered the [greatest climate deal in history](#), the Paris Agreement.

If the agreement is a ‘[major diplomatic success](#)’, it is because it was struck in a particular context which gives additional support to Lindblom’s stance. In short, global governance requires small changes. The [legitimacy of international climate negotiation](#) is derived through consensus, which provides greater legitimacy and acceptability. Besides, if we situate this analysis in the broader scope of the work of Lindblom, this addition of small changes through COPs has helped in many

ways to provide four major improvements: build trust between actors, raise awareness (among states, companies and citizens), improve interactions through regular meetings, and share knowledge between actors. In this respect, the policy of small changes has real arguments to make.

Additionally, international climate change policy needs to address a central concern, that of accounting for differences in development between regions. As Indira Gandhi, India's Prime Minister, famously [said in an address](#) at the 1972 Stockholm Conference: '[a]re not poverty and need the greatest polluters? ... The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty'. Considering the need to account for differences in development and, consequently, perceptions between countries and regions, small changes perform better than an 'infrequent major' change which cannot realistically answer such a need.

Has incrementalism failed us?

However, despite all the small changes that occurred at COPs in the last decades, the IPCC recently warned that unless rapid reductions in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions occur, achieving the goal of limiting the rise of temperature to a maximum of 2°C 'will be beyond reach'. If the crisis is there, should we stop saying that 'everything is fine!' and switch from an incremental approach to thriving for an 'infrequent massive change'? Some people do – I won't. [Paul Schulman](#) considers that 'nonincrementalism' is sometimes the only way forward. For him, some policies require comprehensive decisions and a systemic approach that cannot accommodate any incremental method. He was not mentioning climate change at the time (in 1975), but his vision of *nonincremental* policies as requiring to be 'cast within large-scale and risk-taking frameworks' provides an interesting counterbalance to Lindblom's work. Observing international climate governance, one could say that the only change that really mattered in the last two decades is the least small of all, the Paris Agreement. And in fact, even this deal has [deceived our hopes](#).

In his work [The Peril of Incremental Response to Climate Change](#), Coglianese strongly criticised the incremental model (or 'piecemeal approaches') too. To him, at best 'incremental reforms will have little or no effect on climate change'. However, what Coglianese and many other critiques ignore is the aforementioned peculiarity of international climate negotiations and governance. They forget that the quest for consensus is the cost to pay for international cooperation on this matter.

Towards a more ambitious incremental strategy

Consequently, in light of a complex international climate context and the climate urgency, I would argue that COPs must pursue a more ambitious and comprehensive *incremental* strategy.

Even though I wish to embrace Lindblom's theory, it does not mean that COPs are delivering enough climate action. Lindblom is in fact not only talking about 'small changes' but also about 'a fast-moving sequence of small changes' to deal with crises. Considering the gap between current actions and what should be done according to experts, COPs should do many more (small) changes of higher ambition. Let's face the truth: the Paris Agreement isn't delivering enough because it is a '[dangerous form of incrementalism](#)', not because its targets are insufficient but because its structure is too weak. However, let's face a second truth: even though the international community is not doing enough under the Agreement, this is still probably the '[best alternative](#)' considering what is feasible in the international context.

So yes, it's not great. But even though small steps may not theoretically be enough to fight climate change, it might very well be our only hope and the smartest way forward. This argument has been taken up by several articles, including one published in [Foreign Policy in 2019](#) underlying once again that 'climate change requires big solutions, but baby steps are the only way to go'. This is notably due to the particularity of the climate issue, which is very difficult to tackle because GHG emissions arise from the very activities that define our civilisation. In this line, understanding the '[psychology of small wins](#)' might provide useful insights to international climate policy-making, whereby the reformulation of huge issues as problems requiring small wins could create a transformative process that attracts allies and deters opponents.

Favouring rapid small changes has another superiority, that of dealing with citizens' acceptability in both developing and developed countries. Ted Nordhaus, [in Foreign Policy](#), wrote the following metaphor: 'One response to a carbon tax is to wrap your hot water heater in a thermal blanket and install double-paned windows. Another is to riot.' This provocative sentence expresses an important point regarding domestic building renovation policy: instead of using a unilateral but unacceptable instrument, other alternatives, made of small steps, are to be preferred. This applies to international climate policy in general: since developing countries and citizens from all over the world don't want to pay the bill, there needs to be a reconsideration of what a rapid sequence of small changes can bring.

A new strategic and polycentric approach to international climate policy-making

Maybe we should just read Lindblom again, and stop caricaturing incrementalism. In his 1979 paper, Lindblom explicitly said that when a policy is not working well, instead of 'turning away from incrementalism', the situation usually means 'practicing incrementalism more skilfully'. In today's state of crisis, efficient incrementalism has to become the new normal. Everything is *not* fine, but panic is our worst enemy to deal with the crisis!

International climate policy is particular because it evolves around consensus-building, a process that requires compromises and hence smaller steps. 'The fundamental logic of global public goods makes it difficult for countries to create deep cooperation quickly', [Keohane and Victor wrote in 2016](#). 'The only alternative is to create it slowly, piece by piece.' In their [2011 work](#) on a 'regime complex for climate change', they show that a flexible, adaptable and decentralised regime can deliver significant results. This path would lead us to a broader reconceptualization of our global models of governance, turning to a more polycentric one, a mix of bilateral and multilateral relations, and deeper cooperation inside and [outside](#) the official United Nations governance system. Emerging initiatives are situated in what [Kenneth Abbott and Duncan Snidal](#) call a 'governance triangle', whose three verticals are civil society organisations (CSOs), businesses and the state. Think about businesses' new mechanisms like the Verified Carbon Standard, CSO and businesses collaboration around the Carbon Disclosure project, or general partnerships around REDD+ programmes. In a sense, this new polycentric governance is trying to show that a massive addition of small steps *everywhere* and at *every* level can make a huge change. It might not solve all our problems, but it is still a promising trend. And, at the end of the day, all those small steps may start to build a coherent picture that can eventually lead to a 'tipping point' in climate action!

Say yes to hope!

Consequently, while critiques could justly argue that COPs are the best example of a blind 'everything-is-fine' approach to the current ecological crisis, another perspective is possible. Yes,

there are [reasons to be pessimistic](#) about global emissions. However, we must keep a cool head and rather strive to stir the discussion to the most feasible and desirable small steps. When one fears for the future, one would do well to look for the past for lessons. And this is precisely what I have for you! Let us recall the three particularly relevant lessons that [Richard Benedick](#), chief US negotiator to the Montreal Protocol, drew from his experience surrounding how such an incredible international agreement (around the erosion of the ozone layer) was struck. First, a ‘well-informed public opinion can generate pressure for action by hesitant politicians and private companies’. Second, ‘both NGOs and industry are major participants in the new diplomacy’. Third, ‘strong leadership by major countries and/or institutions can be a significant force in mobilizing an international consensus’. In the coming years, the international community will need to remember these lessons if it wants to climb the stairs of climate action.

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