

Bell, Ruth Greenspan, Micah S. Ziegler, Barry Blechman, Brian Finlay, and Thomas Cottier. 2012. *Building International Climate Cooperation: Lessons for the Weapons and Trade Regimes for Achieving International Climate Goals*. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

Reviewed by Saskia van Wees
University of Florida, United States

This 2012 book commissioned by the World Resources Institute argues that “the perfect should not be the continuing enemy of the good” in climate agreements (p. 62). Drawing from their experiences with the nuclear weapons and international trade regimes, the authors provide new approaches that might help states foster greater cooperation on climate change. In one chapter, Barry Blechman and Brian Finlay do an excellent job presenting the lessons learned from the nuclear weapons regime. In another chapter, Thomas Cottier details the struggles and successes of international economic structures. Both chapters provide insight into the complex international negotiations regarding issue areas that have many similarities to the global collective action problem posed by climate change.

This policy-oriented study seeks to increase the options to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change. All the authors of this book emphasize the value of incremental progress and greater flexibility in future climate agreements; they point out that it has taken many decades of negotiations to achieve the sophisticated weapons and trade regimes in place today, and therefore they take a hopeful tone regarding the slow efforts to mitigate climate change. Blechman and Finlay point out, for example, that it took nineteen years for the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) to be ratified by the original 98 signatories, and that the “success of the NPT illustrates the benefits of moving ahead with an agreement even if key states may not be persuaded to join initially” (p. 76). Similarly, the GATT/WTO took decades to expand its purview beyond manufacturing to include agriculture and services.

The authors underscore the importance of building trust between states through verification mechanisms. Reporting and verification are important in the climate regime, to ensure compliance with commitments to reduce emissions. As trust is built, states may become more willing to forgo certain elements of their sovereignty by creating a formal body to arbitrate disputes between members, similar to the WTO’s dispute settlement body. Agreements on weapons and trade include many examples of how reporting and verification measures build trust and allow for more stringent commitments by members over time.

The authors also describe how flexible approaches to reach agreements in the weapons and trade regimes helped to compartmentalize extremely broad, complicated issues—similar in this aspect to issues faced by members of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Instead of creating one enormous agreement to address nuclear proliferation, for example, the

weapons regime comprises several smaller agreements, including the NPT, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. While these agreements interact, each is limited in scope, so if negotiations stall in one issue area, they can move forward in others to achieve the overall goal of preventing nuclear proliferation.

Similarly, progress can continue without the participation of major players; countries that initially hold out on an accord may join later when they see that the treaty has gained traction and is working effectively. Moreover, countries that refuse to formally ratify certain treaties (such as the United States and China, in the case of the CTBT) may nonetheless uphold the norms of the treaty. This observation is particularly important for climate negotiations, as the authors note that “U.S. ratification of almost any international agreement is increasingly political and difficult” (p. 33). The book provides several examples of international agreements on nuclear weapons and trade that, despite various countries’ abstentions, have nonetheless reached a critical mass of participation.

Finally, the authors argue that setting benchmarks for “graduation” could allow agreements to expand and adapt to changing levels of development among parties. Although the Kyoto Protocol recognizes that Annex I countries are historically responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions, other countries (such as China) are catching up and will have to take on efforts to reduce their emissions as well. Pre-arranged stepping stones to reducing emissions would make the assignment of new commitments under climate agreements less political. The WTO’s Generalized System of Preferences, which allows for reduced import tariff rates for goods coming from developing countries, has been quite successful in setting out “graduation” benchmarks as countries reach certain levels of development.

Building International Climate Cooperation brings together lessons learned from the weapons and trade regimes, and presents alternative and innovative ideas to foster international cooperation on climate change. One of the book’s most important findings is that breaking up large, all-encompassing agreements into smaller components has proven extremely beneficial in the weapons and trade regimes, but it would have been interesting to read more about how the climate regime could be similarly compartmentalized. The authors nonetheless provide a broad set of alternative approaches to tackle the many obstacles faced by the UNFCCC. The book will be useful for both policy-makers and scholars interested in international organizations and negotiations.