



POLICY BRIEF

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Borders and Sustainability in the Anthropocene

Edwin Hodge *

IN BRIEF

- Climate change is a global issue that requires global cooperation.
- Despite this, contemporary international approaches to the climate crisis do the reverse by attempting to carve solutions into projects undertaken by nations within territorial boundaries.
- Public policy needs to work through existing international bodies and empower them to address the global crisis

Executive Summary

Climate change and environmental degradation have reshaped world politics in recent years, yet despite this, outdated approaches to international crises persist. There is no serious challenge to the global scientific consensus on climate change, and while some states may continue to act as if it were otherwise, the environment will increasingly shape state policy in the coming decades. As the climate crisis grows, policymakers are often trapped in a paradigm that has governed international relations for the past century: international agreements are dictated by national interests above all others. While this may make sense in a narrow view of national sovereignty in international affairs, it is counterproductive in the wider lens of global challenges.

Research produced by the Borders in Globalization program over the past several years has pointed to the contradiction sitting at the heart of many international

climate change and sustainability agreements: that frameworks designed to address global challenges must subordinate transnational collaboration to the sovereign interests of the state. The result is that even the most progressive climate change agreements fail to adequately provide the sorts of international governance that is needed to meet the challenges of the 21st Century.

New research indicates that policymakers must work together through global governance structures, including state and non-state organizations and institutions, to address these issues of sustainability. Rather than carve up responsibility for addressing climate change and sustainability into discrete packages mapped on to national territories, state actors must be bold and develop trans- and international structures that work to harmonize national strategies with global initiatives.

* **Edwin Hodge**, PhD, Policy Section Editor for *BIG_Review*, Researcher at the Centre for Global Studies; Continuing Sessional with the Department of Sociology, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.
Contact: edhodge@uvic.ca <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0773-8214>



Introduction

The industrial age marked the end of one geologic period and the beginning of a new one. We now live in the Anthropocene, an era named less for the presence of humans, and more for the impact of our presence on the environment. Unlike in eras past, human activity has reshaped the environment on a global scale and, as a result, has created a climate crisis that is also global. There are many drivers of this new paradigm, but one of the most significant has been the tendency of states to put short and medium-term interests, mostly economic, ahead of long-term interests, both environmental and economic. Instead of planning economic growth that considers the environmental impacts of development, states seek to develop as quickly as possible, or take as many resources from the earth as they can to propel economic growth. It is an example of robbing the future to pay for the present.

The results of this myopia are plain to see; heat domes, polar vortices, extreme typhoons, droughts, floods, forest fires, and hurricanes—and more of them in a season than ever before. These phenomena are part of the natural cycles of growth, destruction, and renewal that dominate life on earth, but human involvement has made each of them more frequent, longer lasting, and more destructive than at any other point in recorded history.

Researchers with the Borders in Globalization program sought to understand how states attempted to manage these different crises and found that while climate change demands a 'deterritorialization' of state and interstate strategies, most governance arrangements today do the opposite. Instead of treating climate crises as an issue that ignores and supersedes borders, most governments approach it as a problem that can be compartmentalized and dealt with piecemeal. Such an approach seems certain fail.

Approach and Results

Research into this challenge tried to illuminate the ways that national preoccupations with maintaining borders as zones of exclusion around a state had the effect of limiting any one nation's ability to address climate change in a meaningful way. A comprehensive examination of international sustainability regimes and trade agreements found that even when agreements were reached that directly claimed to address climate change (such as the use of forests and silviculture as 'carbon offsets' for polluters in the Global North), the reality appears more performative than substantive. Paying a Southern state to plant forests to offset carbon output in the North sounds reasonable, for example, but if the forests planted are routinely harvested for timber or palm oil before they are fully established, then their utility as carbon capture sites is minor at best.

At least part of the problem is that most state policies designed to address climate change rely on neoliberal logics; the state exists to grow and protect the economy and must therefore subordinate other interests to economic growth. Further, research illustrates that even when issues related to climate change are acknowledged, state actors often sidestep formulating solutions by asserting that technological innovation and improved production systems will be sufficient to mitigate them.

The issue, according to research published in 2020, is that while international memoranda of understanding (MOUs) regarding sustainability have provided common language and goals, there has been little in the way of harmonization among states in terms of policy. As the research states,

despite the rhetorical umbrella provided by sustainability, and the numerous aspirational targets in the 2015 SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals], the various international legal arrangements still lack overall coordination or any clear understanding of how they might all fit together in a larger framework dedicated to maintaining a functional biosphere in the face of a rapidly expanding technosphere (Dalby 2020, 147)

In practice, international agreements regarding climate change and sustainable development contain contradictions that seriously weaken their utility. In the case of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, signatories recognized the global and urgent need to address climate change, while at the same time reasserting national sovereignty through the implementation of nation-specific targets. In other words, states recognized in climate change a crisis that ignores national boundaries but committed to only working within their own territories to address it. The result will be much the same as responding to the flooding of an entire neighbourhood by only sandbagging one's own driveway.

The research shows that one of the key hurdles to effective international sustainability strategies is the "fortress model" of environmental management, which often results in limited gains in one area, and potential losses in another.

Replacing the traditional modes of livelihood by paid employment for locals as tour guides, guards against poachers, and employees in the facilities that accommodate and entertain ecotourists who fly across the world to see wildlife in a supposedly natural state might be understood as development in strictly economic terms, but given the huge amounts of jet fuel involved in this international tourism strategy, its far less clear what exactly is being sustained in these circumstances. (Dalby 2020 149).

In plain terms, by engaging with issues of sustainability and climate change mitigation through the lens of national interest, rather than from a position of global

interest, state actors limit their options and weaken their potential impacts.

Conclusion

The findings of this research point inescapably to an unpopular truth in policy circles: sustainability goals that attempt to recognize global challenges but commit only to addressing national concerns are doomed to failure. The realities of the Anthropocene include the reality that global crises cannot be effectively managed or mitigated through reliance on traditional national boundaries.

Traditional notions of environmental protection in stable local natural contexts now have to give way to policy measures that focus on what is being produced in the global economy, and in the process, which landscapes are being re-bordered to make what kind of future global environment (Dalby 2020, 156)

The central challenges of the Anthropocene cannot be met using the methods of the past (which are, not incidentally, at least partially responsible for these challenges in the first place). Instead, the research produced by the *Borders in Globalization* program indicate that governance and regulatory strategies need to adapt, and quickly.

Implications and Recommendations

Any effort to meaningfully implement sustainability agreements will require significant—even radical—solutions. Consider the nature of global supply chains: what would be the impact on pollution and carbon outputs if consumers were asked to be content with eating food that is both in-season and available in their regions, instead of relying on international shipping to obtain the food they desire? What might this do for food security (and food sovereignty), and how would states address that?

At the level of policy, the research has some implications. The first is that policymakers focusing on international sustainability need to recognize the so-called “fortress mentality” that too often results in states limiting their efforts to national priorities. Instead, there must be a renewed focus on developing “grand strategies” for

global governance (at least insofar as climate change and sustainability policies are concerned). Transboundary agreements that infringe on national sovereignty to various extents already exist to help manage everything from water rights and access to power; states must extend the same level of urgency to their international sustainability strategies.

Policymakers must also take a hard look at the ways that domestic economic concerns have traditionally superseded international agreements, even in cases where the agreements are designed to address environmental crises. Neoliberal logics privilege economic-based solutions that focus on the short-term goals of the state, but environmental and sustainability frameworks must look longer term. Further, solutions rooted in neoliberal paradigms tend to see technological innovation as the solution to potential future problems, even if such innovations do not currently exist. Instead of sacrificing economic growth to address issues of sustainability or environmental protection, many states instead attempt to turn environmental issues into economic ones.

Critics have become increasingly forceful in their challenges to the framing of development in terms of conventional economic thinking. They argue that the implicit assumptions of economics, with its premises of consumers and markets as all that matters, are inappropriate given that they ignore the essential biospheric conditions that are key to considerations of sustainability (Dalby 2020, 147)

Certainly, the implications here are radical. States must begin to subordinate elements of domestic economic growth and prioritize international interests when doing so is required to address critical environmental challenges. Such dramatic shifts are beyond the remit of any one policy team, but ought to be part of strategic planning when preparing to address international crises. Economic development is crucial for long-term prosperity, but so is a sustainable biosphere.

Work Cited

Dalby, Simon. 2020. “Bordering Sustainability in the Anthropocene” *Territory, Politics, Governance* 8(2): 144–160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1559758>