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ANALYSIS

Climate change as a global challenge: four theoretical perspectives

Why does climate change persist as a governance problem despite three decades of international commitments? The essay applies institutional, normative, mobilization and decolonial theory to the climate regime, compares what each explains and misses, and proposes a synthesis.

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Introduction

Climate change has emerged as one of the defining global challenges of the twenty-first century. Its consequences cross borders, affect generations, and interact with virtually all areas of social and political life. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992) recognized rising greenhouse gas emissions as a "common concern of humankind," yet decades later emissions continue to rise. Recent Human Development Reports warn of a "dangerous global gridlock" where institutions fail to match the scale and urgency of the problem (HDR 2023/24, 15). The guiding question of this paper is therefore:

How can four theoretical perspectives (institutional, normative, mobilization, and decolonial approaches) help explain the persistence of and responses to the global challenge of climate change?

Each of these traditions highlights different dimensions of global governance. Institutional approaches emphasize how routines and organizational logics shape decision-making (March and Olsen 1996, 12). Normative approaches focus on legitimacy, fairness, and justice in international cooperation (Zürn 2018, 6). Mobilization theories draw attention to the role of protest and social movements in shaping outcomes (Amenta et al. 2010, 290). Decolonial perspectives highlight inequalities between North and South and call for alternative framings of the crisis (Sen 2000, 18).

The essay proceeds in three steps. First, I present a synthesis of the four approaches, drawing on course literature and reflection notes. Second, I reflect critically on how each perspective addresses climate change, what solutions they imply, and where their limitations lie. Finally, I assess their explanatory power and consider what this reveals about the possibilities for global climate governance.

Synthesis of Reflection Notes

To structure the synthesis, I present the four perspectives in turn. I begin with institutional approaches, followed by normative, mobilization, and decolonial approaches. Each subsection summarises the assigned readings only and reserves interpretation for the critical reflection in section 3.

Institutional Approaches

Institutional theory explains political behaviour as guided by rules, roles, and shared meanings, not only by calculated self-interest. March and Olsen distinguish a logic of appropriateness, in which actors ask what someone like them does in each situation, from a logic of

consequentiality, in which behaviour follows expected utility. They present institutions as living arrangements that constitute identities and capabilities and that shape what actions are imaginable or legitimate (March and Olsen 1996, 6-9, 12).

Gümüsay, Claus, and Amis extend the institutional logics perspective to grand challenges. They argue that problems such as climate change involve overlapping and sometimes competing logics of state, market, community, and environment. To analyse such problems, they propose four analytical dimensions. Macro-level positioning links organizational fields to broader societal orders. Contextuality stresses variation across settings. Temporality highlights the evolution of logics over time. Value plurality emphasises the coexistence of multiple normative orders. They note that much prior logics research focused on bounded fields and offer this extension for issues that cross borders and generations (Gümüsay, Claus, and Amis 2020, 1, 35). Dewulf and colleagues examine how environmental knowledge becomes usable in decisionmaking. They identify three decision logics. Under consequentiality, knowledge is valued for instrumental utility. Under appropriateness, use is conditioned by rules and procedures. Under meaningfulness, knowledge must fit interpretive frames and shared narratives. The typology specifies institutional conditions for the uptake of knowledge in public and private decision processes (Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3).

Peters, Jordan, and Tosun analyse patterns of under-reaction and over-reaction in climate policy as institutional outcomes. They argue that routines, venue structures, and institutionalised expectations can bias responses. Severe problems may elicit incrementalism that falls short of problem pressure, while other settings generate disproportionate or misaligned measures. These patterned responses arise from institutional design and process rather than only from preferences or information deficits (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-15, 619). Across these readings, institutional approaches specify how rules, roles, and logics guide behaviour, structure the use of knowledge, and shape recurring patterns of policy response (March and Olsen 1996, 6-12; Gümüsay, Claus, and Amis 2020, 3-5; Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-15).

Normative Theoretical Approaches

Normative approaches in the syllabus foreground questions of legitimacy, justice, and moral responsibility in collective action. Amartya Sen develops human development as an evaluative framework that shifts attention from resources or utilities to people's capabilities to do and be what they have reason to value. He argues for assessing progress by the expansion of substantive freedoms and for viewing policy as enabling agency rather than only delivering goods. In reviewing a decade of the Human Development agenda, Sen emphasises why income is an impoverished metric, why plural values matter, and why comparative assessment should focus on real opportunities available to individuals (Sen 2000, 17-20). He links this to policy by underscoring the role of public reasoning and institutional commitment to expanding capabilities as the core of development practice, not merely growth in GDP (Sen 2000, 20-23). John Rawls presents a contractarian account of justice in which fair principles are those that would be chosen by free and equal persons under conditions that remove knowledge of their identities and social positions. In the original position behind a veil of ignorance, parties are to select principles to regulate the basic structure of society. The two familiar principles secure basic

liberties and regulate social and economic inequalities, permitting inequalities only if they are attached to positions open under fair equality of opportunity and benefit the least advantaged. From this device Rawls derives two principles: equal basic liberties and the difference principle, which permits inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged (Rawls 1971, 136–142).

Taken together, these readings locate evaluation in normative standards rather than in aggregate outcomes. Sen proposes capability expansion as the metric and elevates public reasoning in assessing policy. Rawls proposes a procedural device for identifying fair principles through the original position behind a veil of ignorance (Sen 2000, 17-23; Rawls, 152-158).

Mobilization Theory

Mobilization research examines how collective action shapes political agendas and outcomes. Amenta, Caren, Chiarello, and Su review mechanisms linking movements to policy change, including political mediation, disruption, and organizational capacities. They distinguish outcomes such as agenda access, policy adoption, and implementation, and argue that movement effects depend on the openness of political institutions, elite allies, and countermobilization (Amenta et al. 2010, 287-292, 297-300).

Della Porta's work on transnational contention highlights how global movements operate across scales using varied repertoires and networks, and how political opportunity structures and framing processes condition mobilization and diffusion of tactics (della Porta 2018, 715-720). Walter synthesizes research on the backlash against globalization and shows that rising contestation often reflects politicization by globalization-skeptic actors rather than large shifts in mass attitudes. She links mobilization by anti-globalist entrepreneurs to more protectionist and nationalist policy agendas and to pressure on international cooperation, with consequences mediated by government and international responses (Walter 2021, 422-425, 435-439). Turner et al. proposes a multidimensional measure of protest "success" that incorporates both gains and societal costs. She critiques goal-attainment metrics and develops a 21-point scale distinguishing protest gains from backlash costs. Her analysis of movements in authoritarian settings shows that many cases register negative net scores due to repression and postmobilization backlash (Turner et al. 2023, 1-3, 7-9). Two readings connect mobilization to constitutional change. Welp identifies three fallacies in participatory constitution making. The first imputes moral or epistemic superiority to "the people." The second assumes participation can replace representation. The third presumes that inclusive direct participation automatically resolves legitimacy deficits. She argues these assumptions undermine the expected benefits of participation and offers a framework attentive to process design and power (Welp 2023, 259-261).

Piscopo and Siavelis analyse Chile's 2022 constitutional process, noting how disinformation, illiberal rhetoric, and voter anxieties interacted with the Convention's visibility to shape rejection of a progressive draft. They emphasize the role of mobilized counter-frames in undermining tolerance and trust during the process (Piscopo and Siavelis 2023, 1-3). Together these works treat mobilization as a structured process shaped by opportunities, framing, and counter-mobilization, and they conceptualize outcomes beyond binary success to include diffuse effects and backlash.

Decolonial Approaches

Decolonial approaches in the course examine how colonial histories and racialized knowledge structure contemporary political economy, policy design, and administrative inquiry. Bhambra recenters empire in political economy. She argues that colonial relations formed and continue to sustain the modern global economy, so explanations of capitalism must foreground mechanisms such as colonial appropriation, drain, and imperial infrastructures. This reframing challenges nation-bounded claims to wealth and welfare by showing how European capital formation relied on conquest, dispossession, and enforced property regimes elsewhere (Bhambra 2021, 307-309, 313-314, 319).

Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales conceptualize policy coloniality as a political rationality embedded in policy formulation. They define it as a sorting logic that distinguishes who is seen as deserving of support and who is to be controlled under ostensibly neutral technical frames (Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales 2025, 2). Through cases in Peru and the Netherlands, they show how racialized modernization narratives and instrument choices reproduce hierarchies. Dutch green transition supply chains displace extractive and violent effects to the Global South while expert knowledge presents itself as color blind (Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales 2025, 14, 16-17). Klein proposes reparative public policy as a procedural framework rather than a fixed end state. She outlines four commitments for policy work. First, address methodological nationalism by situating responsibilities in transnational and imperial histories. Second, resist a liberal time that treats colonialism as past and instead recognize ongoing effects. Third, account for racial capitalism and its dehumanizing logics. Fourth, enable plural knowledges rather than presuming a single universal expertise. She then shows how these commitments can reshape framing, analysis, allocation, and implementation so that repair functions as a criterion of procedural legitimacy (Klein 2024, 606-611, 610-611).

Nisar and Masood sketch an otherwise global public administration that is plural, historically aware, and reflexive. Drawing on une pensée autre, they propose five “ways of looking”: with alterity, back to history, differently at questions and lenses, inward at disciplinary exclusions, and dialectically across micro and macro levels. They broaden methods to include storytelling, archival work, and attention to everyday bureaucratic experience (Nisar and Masood 2023, 328, 330, 334-335, 340).

Table 1: Theoretical overview

APPROACH	KEY AUTHORS AND TEXTS	CORE CONCEPTS
Institutional	March & Olsen 1996; Gümüsay et al. 2020; Dewulf et al. 2020; Peters et al. 2017	Logic of appropriateness vs consequentiality; institutional logics (state, market, community, environment); decision logics (consequentiality, appropriateness, meaningfulness); under- and over-reaction
Normative	Sen 1990; Rawls 1971	Veil of ignorance; representatives choose fair principles without knowing wealth, size or power; principles acceptable to plural decent peoples
Mobilization	Amenta et al. 2010; della Porta 2018; Walter 2021; Turner 2020; Welp 2023; Piscopo & Siavelis 2023	Political mediation; repertoires and opportunity structures; politicization and backlash; multidimensional protest outcomes; participation and constitutional change
Decolonial	Bhambra 2021; Jhagroe & Salazar-Morales 2025; Klein 2024; Nisar & Masood 2023	Coloniality of political economy; policy coloniality; reparative public policy; "otherwise" public administration

To conclude the synthesis, Table 1 summarises the four theoretical perspectives discussed above. It organises each approach according to its key concepts, underlying assumptions, and their relevance for understanding climate change. The purpose of this overview is not to evaluate but to provide a concise reference point for the more detailed critical reflection that follows. In the next part of the essay, I return to these perspectives to assess their explanatory power, the kinds of solutions they imply, and their respective limitations.

Critical Reflection

This section moves from literature review to application. I use four theoretical lenses, institutional, normative, mobilization, and decolonial, to examine why climate change persists as a governance problem and how different arrangements respond. I first restate why climate change qualifies as a global challenge in legal and developmental terms. I then apply each lens to the climate case and compare their explanatory power. A compact application matrix summarises the analysis and prepares the ground for the conclusion.

Defining a Global Challenge

There is no single agreed definition of what a global challenge is, but the readings point to some shared features. Steger notes that problems like climate change, pandemics, and inequality cut across borders and cannot be understood through national frameworks alone. They are not only material processes but also shape what he calls a "global imaginary," a sense of belonging to a shared global condition (Steger 2018, 4–9).

At the same time, authors stress that how we define global challenges is shaped by power and perspective. Darian-Smith argues that global studies must be attentive to the dominance of Eurocentric framings, since what counts as a challenge is not neutral but tied to questions of knowledge and authority (Darian-Smith 2018, 251–253). Anheier links global challenges to the rise of global governance but also underlines that responses remain contested and incomplete (Anheier 2018, 769–772).

From a governance angle, Weiss and Wilkinson suggest that global challenges are persistent, multidimensional, and expose the limits of existing institutions. They are problems that spill across borders and resist simple solutions, requiring cooperation among states and non-state actors alike (Weiss and Wilkinson 2021, 1–3).

Bringing these perspectives together, I will use "global challenge" to define problems that are transboundary, long-term, and politically contested, and which test the capacity of existing governance systems. In the next section, I show how climate change fits this description.

Climate Change as a Global Challenge

Fitting the definition above, climate change is a global challenge: its transboundary, unfolds over decades, raises contested questions of responsibility and justice, while testing governance systems. The UN climate regime codifies climate change as a collective problem that crosses borders and generations. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change acknowledges climate change and its adverse effects as a common concern of humankind, noting that developed countries hold the largest share of historical and current emissions, and affirms the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (UNFCCC 1992, 1).

The Convention frames obligations to protect the climate system for present and future generations and creates a standing process for cooperation through conferences of the parties and reporting. This provides a durable venue and embeds expectations of leadership and transparency that shape national and international responses over time (UNFCCC 1992, 1). There is a persistent gap between collective commitments and aggregate outcomes. Institutional analysis of climate policy describes systematic patterns of under reaction and episodic over reaction in complex policy fields. Under reaction appears when routines, venue structures, and expectations dampen responsiveness even as problem pressure rises. Over reaction appears when responses are disproportionate or misaligned. These patterns are linked to institutional design and process rather than to information alone (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

The challenge also has a distributive dimension. The Convention's acknowledgement of differentiated historical responsibility and lower per capita emissions in developing countries places equity at the heart of the regime's design and signals that burden sharing concerns fairness between states at different levels of development (UNFCCC 1992, 1).

Finally, the Paris Agreement operationalises iterative cooperation through nationally determined contributions, reporting, and review cycles, and the decision text highlights the gap between pledged mitigation and pathways consistent with well below 2°C. This frames climate governance as a collective action problem with credibility and ambition deficits to be closed through periodic stocktakes and enhanced ambition (Paris Agreement 2015).

These anchors justify a plural theoretical strategy for the analysis that follows. The regime establishes climate change as a transboundary and intergenerational governance problem with built in distributive stakes, while the policy literature documents recurrent gaps between goals and delivered outcomes that call for institutional, normative, mobilization, and decolonial explanations.

Climate Change Through the Lens of the Theoretical Foundations

I now apply the four perspectives to explain persistence and response, moving from institutional decision logics to justice claims, political mobilization, and decolonial critiques of knowledge and authority.

Institutional Approaches

Institutional theory starts from the idea that actors follow rules and roles that feel appropriate, not only utility-maximizing calculations. March and Olsen describe how routines stabilize "what one ought to do" in a given role, creating durable patterns that resist change even under pressure (March and Olsen 1996, 258). Dewulf and co-authors translate this into decision logics for environmental policy: consequentiality, appropriateness, and meaningfulness shape which knowledge gets used by officials (Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3). The climate domain shows a recurrent pattern of policy under-reaction, where institutions respond more slowly and weakly than problem indicators would warrant (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-619). Read through Kyoto and Paris with this lens, the architecture channels states into incrementalism. Paris codifies nationally determined contributions and periodic stocktakes that privilege procedural conformity and domestic feasibility. Articles 2.2 and 4 emphasize equity, national circumstances, and progression but leave ambition to national logics that are hard to shift once embedded (Paris Agreement 2015). Institutional appropriateness helps explain why ministries honor reporting cycles, inventories, and five-year updates yet struggle to ratchet ambition at the pace implied by emissions trends. Dewulf's third logic also matters: officials act on what is meaningful within existing frames. Where climate data contradict established planning frames or regulatory signals, uptake stalls despite scientific usability (Dewulf et al. 2020, 4-5).

Still, the institutional approach carries assumptions that should be explicit. Decision-making rarely follows a single stable logic. Dewulf and colleagues show how consequentiality and

appropriateness often clash in practice, producing compromise rather than optimisation (Dewulf et al. 2020, 2–3). Peters likewise identifies patterned "under-reaction," as institutions adjust incrementally despite mounting problem pressure (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613– 615). Read this way, designs like Kyoto and Paris are not best-possible solutions but settlements shaped by competing logics and path-dependent routines.

Gümüsay and colleagues argue that grand challenges require plural institutional logics rather than a single efficiency script, which aligns with the mixed signals states face when balancing growth, equity, and decarbonization. That plurality often protects status quo coalitional bargains in the short run. Combined with Peters's account of under-reaction, the institutional lens clarifies why Paris's soft coordination yields widespread compliance with procedures but insufficient convergence on deep decarbonization.

These dynamics also mark the limits of the institutional lens. If institutions are as endogenous and self-reproducing as March and Olsen suggest, the features that secure stability can also inhibit rapid change (March and Olsen 1996, 6–12). The endurance of weak commitments across agreements is therefore evidence of institutional resilience but also of institutional failure. Institutional theory clarifies why climate governance adjusts slowly; it is less suited to specifying how transformative shifts might be achieved (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613– 615).

Normative Theoretical Approaches

Normative theory asks what a fair climate order would require and how legitimacy conditions shape cooperation. Rawls' theory of justice is built around the idea of the original position, where principles are chosen behind a 'veil of ignorance.' From this device he derives the difference principle, which allows inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged (Rawls 1971, 136–142). Sen's human development work shifts evaluation from resources to real freedoms, insisting that policy be assessed by capabilities and agency, not income alone (Sen 2000, 17-21).

Applied to climate change, this suggests two complementary claims. First, distributional fairness must structure mitigation and adaptation burdens so that participation is possible for all peoples. Paris gestures toward this through equity and common but differentiated responsibilities in Article 2.2 but leaves allocation principles under-specified. The legitimacy of global coordination then rests on whether parties perceive burdens as fair and on whether procedures enable meaningful agency for those most affected (Paris Agreement 2015). Second, capability-sensitive policy links mitigation to development pathways that expand agency. The Human Development Report argues that governance should be people-centered and co-owned, with agency gaps narrowing when institutions invite voice and share burdens credibly (HDR 2023/24, 23).

These two approaches rest on different assumptions. Rawls looks for principles that would be chosen under fair conditions, while Sen avoids a fixed list and instead emphasises open-ended reasoning and comparison (Rawls 1971, 136–142; Sen 2000, 17–23). This difference matters in climate politics. Rawls' veil of ignorance offers a benchmark for fairness: negotiators unaware of their country's emissions profile would likely choose stronger protections for vulnerable states. Sen's capability approach, by contrast, ties fairness to whether policies expand freedoms and agency. Both frames are visible in treaty language, yet they remain contested in practice.

The meaning of fairness also varies across political contexts. In South Africa, climate justice debates often link mitigation to questions of energy poverty and structural inequality. In Chile, the constitutional reform process revealed how environmental rights clashed with an economic model based on resource extraction (Piscopo and Siavelis 2023, 1–3; Welp 2023, 259–261). These cases show that fairness is not a single principle applied everywhere, but a contested idea shaped by domestic politics and power struggles.

These two strands help interpret the empirical record. Kyoto's fixed commitments for a subset of parties struggled to elicit broad legitimacy once major emitters outside Annex lists grew. Paris broadened inclusion by letting each society set its own path, which improved participation but exported the fairness fight to the domestic level. Where publics view climate rules as fair and agency-expanding, cooperation strengthens. Where rules are seen as externally imposed or development-constraining, ratcheting stalls. Normative perspectives therefore highlight why climate governance is fought over in terms of justice. They clarify principles of responsibility and fairness, but they cannot by themselves resolve the disputes over what fairness should mean in practice.

Mobilization Theory Approaches

Social movement scholarship treats policy as an outcome of interaction between challengers and authorities, mediated by resources, political opportunities, and discursive resonance. Amenta et al. synthesize evidence that movements influence agendas, roll call votes, and implementation through multiple pathways, not only immediate law adoption (Amenta et al. 2010, 287-300). Turner et al. shows in authoritarian settings that protest success depends on tactical choice, elite splits, and the risk of repression, highlighting backfire and adaptation dynamics that also appear in hybrid regimes (Turner et al. 2023, 1-9). Walter details how repression can produce backfire when authorities overreach, but also how governments learn to contain dissent, shaping cycles of contention around high-stakes policies like energy transition (Walter 2021, 422-439).

A key question is what counts as success for mobilisation. Amenta and colleagues suggest success can be assessed at three stages: placing issues on the agenda, gaining access to decision venues, and securing policy change or implementation (Amenta et al. 2010, 287–300). In climate politics, movements like Fridays for Future achieved visibility and reframed norms, but sustained venue access has been harder, and binding policy change remains the most difficult given institutional and cost barriers (Amenta et al. 2010, 297–300).

For climate politics, this lens helps explain surges of ambition after visible mobilization, as well as plateaus when coalitions fragment. Movement pressure often raises the political costs of inaction, pushes agenda salience before stocktakes, and reframes what counts as appropriate state behavior in line with the institutional logic discussed above. At the same time, implementation can lag if mobilization does not penetrate venues where technical rules are written. Comparative work on constitution-making shows participation can be symbolically expansive yet substantively constrained by design choices and veto points, a warning that also applies to multilevel climate governance (Welp 2023, 259-262; Piscopo and Siavelis 2023, 13). The Chilean constitutional process shows both the promise and the limits of mobilisation. Activists put ecological rights on the agenda and helped shape the draft, but backlash and high political costs led to a clear rejection at the referendum (Piscopo and Siavelis 2023, 1–3; Welp

2023, 259–261). By contrast, transnational youth campaigns like Fridays for Future kept pressure high across countries, yet with limited access to technical venues their gains have been mainly discursive rather than institutional. These cases show how venue access and cost logics shape the path from mobilisation to durable change.

Mobilization helps account for pulses in policy ambition that do not translate into steady emissions decline. Movements excel at agenda setting and norm entrepreneurship; authorities respond with partial concessions or counter-mobilization. Table 2 captures this as a mechanism of pressure and backlash that operates through electoral, administrative, and judicial channels identified by Amenta and colleagues (Amenta et al. 2010, 292-297). Mobilisation helps explain how pressure and framing rise; but without venue access and manageable costs, it rarely produces durable policy change.

Decolonial Approaches

Decolonial work interrogates how colonial power relations and racialized knowledge shape what problems are seen, which solutions are legitimate, and who counts as a knower. Bhambra argues that wealth and capacity in the Global North were historically constituted through imperial expropriation, which reframes contemporary questions of legitimacy and entitlement in national patrimonies (Bhambra 2021, 313). Klein proposes a reparative public policy approach with four procedural pillars: moving beyond methodological nationalism, expanding policy time horizons, recognizing racial capitalism, and embracing pluriversality in knowledge (Klein 2024, 606-607). Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales theorize policy coloniality as a political rationality that reproduces racialized hierarchies through ostensibly neutral expertise and design, documenting how climate and health policies can embed colonial knowledge both in the Global South and North (Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales 2025, 2; 5; 17, 21).

Applied to climate governance, this lens clarifies recurrent controversies around technology pathways, financing, and metrics. Methodological nationalism pushes policy to treat emissions and adaptation within state borders even when supply chains and historical responsibilities are transboundary, which weakens the match between causes and burdens. Reparative procedure would instead center interconnection and longer temporalities, making historical responsibility and future risk co-determinants of burden sharing. That reframing aligns with Paris's equity clause but would require institutional changes in how expertise is validated and whose evidence counts in stocktakes (UNFCCC 1992). The Human Development Report's call for peoplecentered and co-owned institutions offers a pragmatic bridge, since agency expansion is both a development goal and a legitimacy condition for climate policy in contexts marked by coloniality (HDR 2023/24, 23).

Decolonial approaches therefore add two things Table 2 cannot show by itself. First, they name mechanisms that sit beneath institutional appropriateness, such as how "neutral" design tools encode racialized hierarchies in participation and in cost allocation. Second, they shift the evaluative baseline from efficiency within current borders to repair across entangled histories, which changes what counts as a credible solution path in finance, transition minerals, and loss and damage.

Table 2: Application matrix

APPROACH	CORE CONCEPTS	EXPLANATIONS OFFERED
Institutional	Logic of appropriateness vs consequentiality; institutional logics; decision logics; under- and over-reaction	Accounts for procedural compliance but substantive drift; explains why Kyoto's rigidity faltered and why Paris relies on flexible coordination and review
Normative	Veil of ignorance; fair principles chosen without knowing wealth, size or power; principles acceptable to plural decent peoples	Clarifies fairness claims behind capacity-sensitive burden-sharing and equity language without assuming full cosmopolitan redistribution
Mobilization	Political mediation; repertoires and opportunity structures; politicization and backlash; multidimensional protest outcomes; participation and constitutional change	Explains agenda setting and framing power; shows why breakthroughs stall when access narrows and political costs rise
Decolonial	Coloniality of political economy; policy coloniality; reparative public policy; "otherwise" public administration	Shows how metrics and participation rules can reproduce hierarchy; points to small procedural repairs in reporting, review and finance governance

Comparison & Evaluation

The four perspectives offer different ways of understanding why climate change persists and how it is addressed. None of them provides a complete explanation on its own, but each highlights dimensions that the others leave aside. In this section, I compare their strengths and weaknesses, focusing on what each approach explains well, where their limits lie, and how they can be related to one another. This also makes it possible to reflect on whether some perspectives are more helpful than others for analysing climate change as a global challenge.

What Each Perspective Explains Well

Institutional approaches account for the persistent gap between climate goals and aggregate outcomes. March and Olsen show how actors follow roles and rules that feel appropriate, not only utility calculations, which stabilises routines and narrows the range of acceptable moves in policy choice (March and Olsen 1996, 6-9, 12). Dewulf and co-authors specify how knowledge enters decision processes under three logics, consequentiality, appropriateness, and meaningfulness, which clarifies why even robust climate evidence fails to move policy if it does not fit prevailing frames or procedures (Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3). Peters, Jordan, and Tosun

identify patterned under reaction and episodic over reaction in complex fields, which matches the long periods of incrementalism that have characterised the UNFCCC era (Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

Normative approaches explain why cooperation depends on fairness and perceived legitimacy. Sen relocates evaluation from income to capabilities and agency, which makes climate policy a question of enabling real freedoms rather than only distributing costs and benefits on a narrow metric (Sen 2000, 17-23). Rawls frames justice through the original position and the difference principle, which provide criteria for fair burden sharing by requiring that inequalities work to the advantage of the least well off (Rawls 1971, 136–142). The UNFCCC preamble itself foregrounds differentiated responsibilities and capabilities, so the regime's own legal language invites normative assessment of who should do what and why (UNFCCC 1992, 1).

Mobilization approaches capture how pressure accumulates and why results are uneven. Amenta and colleagues show multiple pathways from protest to policy, including agenda access, elite alliances, and venue shifts, which helps explain punctuated gains around COP cycles and national elections (Amenta et al. 2010, 287-300). Turner et al.´s multidimensional scoring clarifies that apparent wins can carry high costs, and that backlash or repression can outweigh short term achievements, a logic that travels to contentious climate arenas as well (Turner et al. 2023, 1-9). Della Porta maps transnational contention and repertoires that cross levels, while Walter's work on backlash helps explain counter mobilisation against climate measures in polarised settings (della Porta 2018, 715-720; Walter 2021, 422-439). Decolonial approaches explain the structure of claims and the production of hierarchy within apparently neutral procedures. Bhambra recentres colonial extraction in the history of wealth and capacity, which reframes distributive debates over climate finance and loss and damage by tying them to the provenance of advantage (Bhambra 2021, 307-309, 313-314, 319). Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales define policy coloniality as a political rationality that sorts populations into those to be supported and those to be controlled and they document how sustainability policy can externalise social and environmental costs to the Global South through supply chains (Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales 2025, 2; 14; 16-17). Klein proposes a reparative procedural framework for policy that addresses methodological nationalism, expands temporal horizons, recognises racial capitalism, and embraces pluriversality, which supplies mid level design guidance for climate governance work on finance and transition (Klein 2024, 606-611). Nisar and Masood add an otherwise ethos for administration that is plural, historically aware, and attentive to methods like storytelling and archival work, which widens what counts as evidence in climate decision making (Nisar and Masood 2023, 328, 334-335, 340).

What Each Perspective Misses

Institutional approaches often treat distributional conflict as exogenous. Rules, roles, and logics explain stability and drift, but they do not by themselves tell us which distributional settlement ought to guide ambition or finance. As a result, institutional analysis can describe under reaction yet leave the fairness question to other lenses (March and Olsen 1996, 6-12; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615).

Normative approaches can specify fair principles without explaining how these principles acquire traction inside complex organisations. Rawls' device of the original position behind a veil of ignorance provides a benchmark for fairness by requiring that principles be chosen without

knowledge of one's social position (Rawls 1971, 152–158). Sen justifies a capabilities metric, but neither framework shows how ministries or firms translate these standards into routines and incentives in time-bound cycles such as nationally determined contributions and stocktakes (Sen 2000, 17–23).

Mobilization approaches can over predict policy change when they treat agenda setting as a proxy for implementation. Amenta and colleagues caution that effects depend on venue access and elite allies, and Turner et al.´s work shows that costs and backlash are common outcomes, which implies that mobilization on climate can raise salience without securing durable reform if institutional gateways remain closed (Amenta et al. 2010, 292-300; Turner et al. 2023, 7-9). Decolonial approaches identify histories and rationalities that reproduce inequality, but they sometimes leave open how to embed repair in existing treaty cycles and budget rules. Klein begins to fill this gap with a procedural program and Nisar and Masood supply methodological guardrails, yet neither specifies how to allocate emissions cuts or contributions within Paris accounting rules, which are written in the language of nationally determined progression and transparency rather than reparations (Klein 2024, 606-611; Nisar and Masood 2023, 328, 340; UNFCCC 1992).

A Provisional Ranking and a Synthesis

For the persistence of the problem across the UNFCCC era, the institutional lens is the strongest explanatory baseline. It gives a mechanism that maps directly onto the observed pattern. Routines, appropriateness, mixed institutional logics, and knowledge use together yield compliance with procedures and slow ambition, which fits the trajectory of commitments and outcomes in the UNFCCC era (March and Olsen 1996, 6-12; Gümüsay, Claus, and Amis 2020, 3-5; Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

However, institutional analysis alone cannot decide what level of ambition counts as fair or legitimate. Here the normative lens is essential. Rawls offers criteria for fairness through the veil of ignorance and the difference principle, and Sen gives a capabilities metric that aligns mitigation and adaptation with agency expansion. These standards support design choices in finance and loss and damage that are not visible from procedure alone and they speak to the legitimacy conditions that affect participation and compliance (Rawls 1971, 136–142; Sen 2000, 17-23; UNFCCC 1992, 1).

Mobilization then functions as the driver that opens windows and raises the political cost of inaction. It connects societal pressure to venue access, frames, and elite alliances, which helps explain the pulses of policy movement around COPs and elections, as well as backlash that can produce stalemates or reversals (Amenta et al. 2010, 287-300; Turner et al. 2023, 1-9; della Porta 2018, 715-720; Walter 2021, 422-439).

Decolonial analysis revises the baseline by naming the provenance of advantage and the knowledge politics inside policy design. It gives reasons for differentiated ambition and finance beyond efficiency and adds procedural guidance for repair. It also identifies how seemingly neutral instruments can externalise costs to the Global South, which is directly relevant for transition minerals, technology pathways, and loss and damage (Bhambra 2021, 307-309, 313314, 319; Jhagroe and Salazar-Morales 2025, 2; 16-17; Klein 2024, 606-611). A practical synthesis follows. Use the institutional lens to diagnose where decision logics and organisational

routines block ambition. Use the normative lens to set fair burden sharing and legitimacy benchmarks. Use the mobilization lens to identify pressure points and likely backlash along multiple venues. Use the decolonial lens to redesign procedures so that repair and plural knowledge are built into analysis, allocation, and implementation. This combined strategy speaks directly to the regime's own language on equity and progression while acknowledging patterned under reaction documented in the policy literature (UNFCCC 1992; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

Implications for the Case

The persistent governance–outcome gap is consistent with institutional under-reaction. Table 2 condenses the mechanisms I have analysed (decision logics, venue access and costs, politicisation and backlash) and ties them to where slippage between promises and delivery is most likely. The distributional context is also central: the Human Development Report shows that countries with higher human development tend to exert greater planetary pressures while vulnerability is unevenly borne, which is exactly what the normative and decolonial lenses ask us to consider (UNDP 2024, 57–58).

On balance, if I must select one lens as the strongest single explanation for persistence, it is the institutional lens, because it maps mechanisms to the aggregate pattern with the fewest auxiliary assumptions. Yet the evaluation also shows that the institutional account becomes more policy relevant once it is combined with normative criteria for fairness and with decolonial guidance on procedure and knowledge, while mobilization indicates where and when change is likely to occur and at what cost. That combination is consistent with the regime's design features and with the evidence on patterned responsiveness in complex policy fields (UNFCCC 1992, 1; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

Conclusion

This essay examined climate change as a transboundary and intergenerational governance problem and applied four theoretical perspectives to explain persistence and response. The UN climate regime frames climate change as a common concern of humankind and affirms common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, which places equity at the centre of cooperation design (UNFCCC 1992, 1). The empirical pattern of rising emissions through the UNFCCC era underscores a gap between commitments and outcomes that motivates institutional, normative, mobilization, and decolonial analysis.

Institutional approaches explain why procedural compliance can coexist with slow ambition. Rules, roles, and decision logics channel attention and action, and they help account for recurrent under reaction and episodic over reaction in complex policy fields (March and Olsen 1996, 6-12; Dewulf et al. 2020, 1-3; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619). Normative approaches supply criteria for what a fair climate order should require. Sen relocates evaluation from income to capabilities and agency, and Rawls articulates fairness through the veil of ignorance and the difference principle, which together justify equity sensitive burden sharing (Sen 2000, 17-23; Rawls 1971, 136–142). Mobilization research clarifies how movements shape agendas and venues, how gains and costs should be measured, and why backlash is common

when reform threatens entrenched interests (Amenta et al. 2010, 287-300; Turner et al. 2023, 1-9). Decolonial approaches recast distributional conflict by locating responsibility and vulnerability in colonial political economy and by identifying how ostensibly neutral policy templates can reproduce hierarchy. They also propose procedural guidance for repair and for plural knowledge practices in administration (Bhambra 2021, 307-309, 313-314, 319; Klein 2024, 606-611; Nisar and Masood 2023, 328, 334-335, 340).

The comparison suggests a practical synthesis. Use institutional analysis to diagnose decision logics and routine-based bottlenecks. Use normative standards to set fair burden sharing and legitimacy benchmarks that are recognisable to participants. Use mobilization theory to identify pressure points and likely backlash across electoral, administrative, and judicial channels. Use decolonial procedure to align design and evidence with historical responsibility and with plural knowledges. This combination is consistent with the regime's own language on equity and progression and with the observed pattern of under reaction in climate policy (UNFCCC 1992 and 4; Peters, Jordan, and Tosun 2017, 613-615, 619).

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