Climate and Transitions Climate Diplomacy Behind Closed Doors*

By Pierre Henri Guignard and Claude Garcia



A couple of months ago, COP 28 convened in Dubai and, against all expectations, delivered an unprecedented consensus signaling an acceleration in phasing out fossil fuels. Regarded by some as a triumph against the odds and by others as a mixed blessing, the 'Dubai Consensus,' driven by an oil-rich monarchy, embodies both a notable achievement and a tangible letdown. However, isn't this the case with all climate and environmental agreements?

On November 17th 2023, for the first time, global temperatures exceeded 2°C above pre-industrial seasonal averages. This threshold was one the international community pledged not to reach, let alone surpass, with the adoption of the Paris Agreement on December 12th, 2015. Specifically, the Paris Agreement aims to keep "the increase in the global average temperature well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels." This goal now seems out of reach.

The only surprising aspect here has been the speed at which global temperatures have changed. We thought we had more time. But who really believed this goal could be achieved? In 2019, during COP 25 in Madrid, we informally asked over a hundred participants this question. All shared their pessimism about humanity's trajectory. Only one person believed we could meet the commitment—one out of a hundred, among those whose mission is precisely to help achieve this goal. Imagine the attitude of the rest of the world. This is an agreement that almost no one believes in.

With a few exceptions—namely the encouraging results following the adoption of the Montreal Protocol in 1987 regulating ozone-depleting substances, but even that is now being questioned —it seems that on environmental issues, targets consistently elude us. Whether it's reducing pesticide use, combating deforestation, or addressing biodiversity loss, we continuously raise our ambitions and fail to achieve them.

The Failure of Treaties

In 2022, a striking article titled "International Treaties Most Often Fail to Produce Intended Effects" was published by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences in the prestigious journal PNAS[i]. This systematic review, the gold standard of literature reviews, demonstrates that only trade treaties with binding enforcement mechanisms seem effective and yield tangible results. All other treaties miss their target.

How is this possible? Why do the cornerstones of international diplomacy, the primary tools we have to govern humanity's existential challenges, fail?

It would be easy and perhaps tempting to answer that these agreements are precisely constructed for this purpose. Without binding force, costly to implement, and undermining the competitiveness of compliant parties, they would be designed to fail, aiming to hinder, delay, or divert the change they claim to seek. This is the cynical response of those who no longer believe in anything but brute force.

The reality is more complex, and it is imperative to understand it if we want to build effective responses to the challenges we face. The reasons for these failures lie in four key elements: the information available to us, the beliefs within us, the values we adopt, and the means at our disposal.

These elements can be conceived as doors, and each of us takes a stance on a given issue based on the state of these four doors, alternately open or closed[i].

Closed Doors

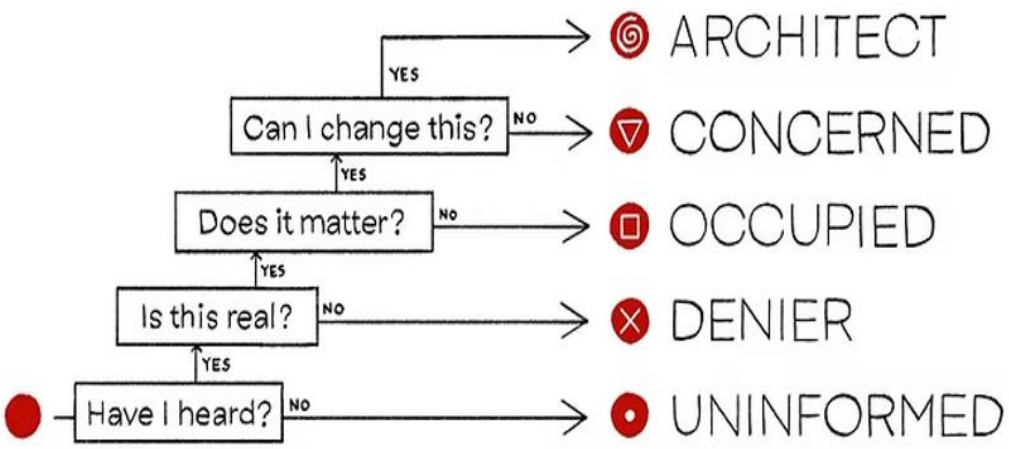
As long as the first door remains closed the door of information we remain unaware of the problem. We don't even realize there is a problem to begin with. We are Uninformed. Regarding the climate issue, this door is now wide open, thanks to the mobilization of the scientific community, the media, the youth, and the education sector. Who can claim today not having heard of climate change or biodiversity loss?

The second door is much more challenging to open it involves abandoning old beliefs and adopting new ones. Many around us doubt or deny the reality of climate change or its causes. Those who don't believe the information they receive will refuse to change and actively resist against the forces of change. Let's call them the Deniers. For them, this door remains closed.

Those who have the information and do not doubt its validity still need to decide if change is their priority. The third door is the one of the values we uphold. Many among us believe that climate change is not our concern. It's the concern of the wealthy, of future generations, of the government, or some distant country. There are many reasons for having better things to do than look for solutions, and some are more legitimate than others. Let's call those in this category the Occupied. They will not give the problem the attention, resources, or time needed to find appropriate answers. The Occupied ones push the problem into the future. For them, the third door remains closed.

Finally, some sincerely believe that it is urgent and important to act. But even that is not enough. Indeed, one must still wonder if it is possible to act, if it is possible to change. The fourth and final door is that of the means. Many feel our powerlessness. What can we do at our level, we simple citizens? The task is immense, and we lack resources, expertise, and influence to have any meaningful impact. Faced with the complexity of the global equation, we think ourselves powerless. Let's call these the Concerned. Individuals in this predicament experience cognitive dissonance, compelled to act contrary to their beliefs yet feeling unable to change their situation. This condition is distressing and often agonizing, breeding frustration and subsequently anger. Remaining in such a state, where one convinces oneself of their own powerlessness, is unsustainable. Ultimately, one is driven to either resign, adopt a cynical outlook, or take a stand.

Stagnation or Conflict



As long as the decision-makers around the table belong to these four categories — uninformed, deniers, occupied, and concerned—change is impossible, and the dialogue boils down to a power struggle without real progress. The occupied ones defend their interests and form alliances with the deniers against the concerned. The only possible alternatives are then stagnation or conflict.

These closed doors are the sources of the failure of public policies. Having recognized them, we must now learn to open them. We call Architects those who can, on a given issue, open all four doors—who have access to information, accept its truth, take responsibility, and mobilize the means at their disposal for effective action[ii].

In this sense, the adoption of the Paris Agreement—the first universal climate treaty—is an undeniable success in itself: Architects were at work. But if it fails to achieve its objectives, the agreement will be perceived as a failure regardless of the reasons: We refused to change, we did not believe that change was necessary, or we thought that

change was beyond our means. Additionally, the accelerated fragmentation of the international order does not help in finding a new consensus.

Breaking Doors Open

What are the steps to initiate change? Recognizing that change is achievable marks the first step. While the Paris Agreement's success can be attributed to diplomatic efforts – particularly French ones - it's clear that a fortuitous alignment of factors played a key role: the impactful 5th IPCC report released in 2013, a series of extreme weather incidents in the United States, pollution crises in China, and the influential Laudato Si! encyclical, among others, all sparked a positive momentum. This was further amplified by the extensive engagement of various social actors (including activists, associations, corporations, trade unions, local governments, farmers, and researchers), collectively creating momentum for constructive action.

The adoption of an agreement or treaty transcends the work of negotiators and political decision-makers; it is the result of the convergence of minds and energies, the product of participatory multilateralism contributing to the construction, at a given moment, of a global consensus that exceeds the very intentions of the initiators of the diplomatic agreement. In reality—and this is probably the case with the Paris Agreement—at the moment of its completion, an environmental or climate agreement is already outpaced. Its true value then lies in laying the groundwork for the next step toward a satisfactory solution for the planet and the permanence of humanity.

The writing of the next climate agreement began on December 12, 2015. Here we are, now well into 2024. How can we make sense of the Dubai agreement?

The first, and perhaps obvious, observation is that the Uninformed, assuming any still exist, were by definition, absent. Turning our attention to the attendees, just days before COP28 commenced, Sultan Al Jaber, the summit's president, controversially

declared that there is no scientific evidence to support the phased-out elimination of fossil fuels as a necessity for fulfilling the Paris Agreement's objectives. This statement, without making assumptions about the COP president's personal beliefs or mindset, categorically placed him among the Deniers at that moment. During the addresses by various heads of state, a number highlighted the immediate and fundamentally disruptive nature of the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine. This focus, while inherently valid, mirrors the perspective of those Occupied by more pressing issues. What was perhaps most telling was the banner that greeted attendees in the main foyer: "Change What's Possible". This could be interpreted as a call to transform the world; yet, most analysts viewed it as an appeal to reason. What might be dismissed as an unfortunate choice of words comes across as an insidious and powerful directive, subtly coercing adherence and advocating for operation within preset boundaries, all the while discouraging any challenge to the existing order. This hardly could be a clearer articulation of the stance of the Concerned.

So, is it a historic agreement or a compromise of circumstance? By postponing the deadlines to 2050, it is the work of decision-makers caught up in emergencies and wanting to prolong the status quo for some time. It is a victory for the Occupied. Three of the five archetypes were present in Dubai, in prominent positions. Were there also Architects? Yes. At least three things allow us to affirm this. First, the agreement was adopted by consensus by 194 countries. This, once again, is an achievement in itself, seemingly impossible before being achieved. Secondly, Colombia was the first major country to sign the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Fossil Fuels—President Petro stating, "We choose the side of life." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Dubai agreement explicitly mentions all fossil fuels. It is a collective disapproval of the arguments put forward by the Deniers. The second door will now be difficult to close.

Let's not fall prey to discouragement, cynicism, or anger. Here are the four locks to lift: information, beliefs, values, and means. There is a personal dimension to this transformation, and each of us needs to be aware of it. The five archetypes we have outlined here reflect this journey: the responsibility of each individual is involved in

both transformation and stagnation. However, this does not mean we should ignore the responsibility of political or economic decision-makers, social forces, mechanisms of domination, accumulation and sharing, the construction of imaginations and narratives, or even cultural battles. While positions are individual, the journey that transitions us from one state to another is socially constructed, and it is possible to close or open doors for others. Keeping this theory in mind can help develop more effective transformation strategies.

Let's open these doors in us and help others do the same, and let us become Architects of change.

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[i] Hoffman, Steven J., et al. "International treaties have mostly failed to produce their intended effects." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 119.32 (2022): https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2122854119

[ii] Waeber, Patrick O., et al. "Choices we make in times of crisis." Sustainability 13.6 (2021): 3578. https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/6/3578

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