



UNFCCC Case Study

In this case study, what we're going to do is to apply the basic principles that we saw earlier during the course to policy. Our second example deals with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This is a really important convention because we all face the consequences of global warming, or climate chaos as some people prefer to call it. The burning of fossil fuels puts greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere. These capture the sun's energy. This causes a warming of the planet, and that then changes the climate systems, which then results in some very strange weather. So in that way, reaching an international agreement is about the first principle of justice. We need equality.

We need everybody to get on board and solve this global problem. But the UNFCCC convention also contains a lot about fairness and justice as well in the second principle. It has the principle of differentiated responsibilities. Now, under this principle, the developed countries, the ones who historically have been using fossil fuel resources to generate energy and build up their economies, are the ones that need to cap their emissions. Whereas developing countries, who are the countries who haven't historically been responsible for a lot of greenhouse gas emissions, don't have to cap their emissions. So that meets the second principle that when there are differentiations, when there's inequality, then the benefits run to the least advantages.

In this case the rich nations have their emissions capped, and the poorer developing countries don't have their emissions capped, which then gives them the opportunity of developing their economies. The problem is that principle of differentiated responsibilities and the climate change negotiation didn't please everybody. And in 1997 when the Kyoto Protocol was negotiated, the United States Senate had a vote on what was called the Byrd-Hagel Resolution about whether or not the US should sign up to the Kyoto Protocol or not. The Byrd-Hagel Resolution was fairly simple, and it went straight for this principle of differentiated responsibilities.

It said that the United States should not sign up to any protocol or agreement which, first of all, harmed the economy of the United States, in other words capping the emissions on its energy production and so directly affecting the economy, or that contained the principle of differentiated responsibilities where developing countries didn't have to cap their own emissions. That resolution was passed 95 votes to 0 by the United States Senate. And at that point in 1997, effectively the Kyoto Protocol was hamstrung. So in summary, let's have a look at the way that difficulty of bringing fairness to the present causes problems for the future.

Now, if we think about the climate change negotiations, the first climate change convention, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, was agreed in 1992.

And that's more than 20 years ago. The Kyoto Protocol, which was designed to implement the agreements from the original Framework Convention, was in 1997. So that's nearly 20 years ago. So OK, I'm part of the present generation that's associated with those conventions. But there were people there who would now be past generations. And there are certainly a lot of people present on the planet who are now future generations relative to those negotiations.

The principles of fairness were embodied in those negotiations, but they were ignored when it came to one of the world's major polluters signing up to the Kyoto Protocol. And as a result, the negotiations and the implementation has run into problems. If we had actually adopted those basic principles of justice and fairness right at the beginning and we thought about the needs of the present generations in terms of both equality and the benefits running to the least advantaged if there was inequality, then we wouldn't be in the problem that we're in now with respect to climate change. We would have used our ingenuity to solve those problems.

And things on the planet as a whole would be a lot more just and a lot more fair.

[End of transcript]