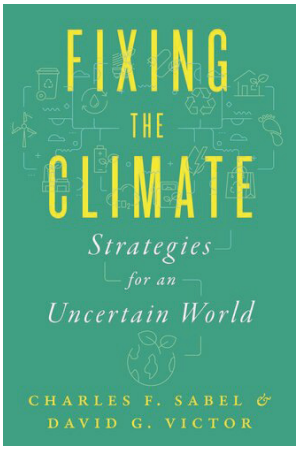
Fixing the Climate Strategies for an Uncertain World



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Author: Charles F. Sabel* and David G. Victor; Princeton University Press, 2022; ISBN 9780691224541 (ebook)

There is no doubt the ecological transition and transformation has to accelerate. But how? Despite decades of negotiations by world leaders and global climate diplomacy, the climate crisis has worsened, emphasising the need for a different approach. A rethink is the goal of "Fixing the Climate: Strategies for an uncertain world" by Charles Sabel and David Victor, published by Princeton University Press. Instead of efforts overly focused on global diplomacy and the crafting of global consensus, the book suggests a system based on experimentation, learning and contextualisation. It is a compelling and insightful book that will be of great interest not only to academic readers but also to climate activists and policy makers.

These high-calibre voices add to the chorus emphasising the urgency of ecological change. Actually, David Victor's contribution is not new among those calling for decisive, immediate and practical action for transition. David's commitment to bridging the gap between climate science, policy and energy market regulation is known.[1] Particular noteworthy is the strong and respected voice of Charles Sabel: one of the most insightful, brilliant and thought-provoking social sciences theorists in our times. He has conducted innovative, diverse and ground-breaking research in different fields, countries and continents. His work ranges from economic development and industrial organisation to public services and the governance of complex institutions and networks.[2] Sabel's work has significantly influenced the way industry in the US and many European countries are responding to the decline of mass production and changing global competition. More in general, he has proposed a logic of experimentation to solving problems marked by deep uncertainty. It is only good news that he has also successfully addressed climate change issues in recent years.

The value of the book, however, goes far beyond the welcome call to action by renowned authors. It is about proposing

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a new paradigm that seeks solutions and successful collective action from new angles. It is a dense, rich and ground-level cases based book that deserves a detailed reading of the multiple points it contains. Here I would like to highlight three of them that are respectively about the transition agenda, the transition paradigm and the transition international cooperation.

First of all, about the ecological transition agenda. The book helps to shift the discussion undertaken in a long series of conferences and forums from an almost exclusive emphasis on how to finance the transformation to a simultaneous indispensable debate on what to do and how.

Of course, the financing matters remain fundamental in the agenda and require greater engagement. The reason for this is known. Climate change affects all countries and all of them have to invest more in the transformation. Moreover, climate change touches especially the poorest, who pay the highest price even though they have contributed little to the climate crisis. Developing countries are overwhelmed by challenges: they need at the same time to reduce carbon emissions and to adress both the negative consequences of the pandemic and the increase in infectious diseases and poverty. Many of them are therefore facing debt problems or have a high risk of falling into them and consequently reducing their transition efforts. Given these challenges, it is indispensable that the global community, particularly developed countries, play a more active role in providing financial support. This is not just a matter of moral responsibility, but also of practical necessity, as the impacts of climate change and associated economic challenges do not respect national borders and can have far-reaching consequences for the entire world.

In addition to the existing concerns, financial matters require more and better certainty and accountability. Often, countries indulge in "announcement or declaration effects" to shape public opinion, boost approval, calm fears, and orient market expectations and international relations. However, commitments are frequently insufficiently fulfilled, and spending figures are distorted,[3] The reporting on financial pledges and provisions is confusing and inaccurate, making it challenging to track actual contributions and expenditures. To address this, there is an urgent need for transparent mechanisms to ensure accurate reporting and enhance the tracking and traceability of funds. There is also a need for a reform of the international assistance governance, potentially around more globally representative tables. This is not merely a procedural necessity, as the consequences of inaction include diminished trust among countries and ineffective climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.

However, if the focus on financial commitments during global discussions is important, it is not enough to capture the full spectrum of necessary changes. The transition to a sustainable future requires

more than just financial commitments and accountability. It is at least as important to suggest and encourage new changes in our production and consumption patterns, both individually and collectively. Continuing our current practices in these areas will inevitably lead to the same detrimental outcomes. We should therefore commend the book for making a difference and looking in depth at some of the directions that define what to do and how. In particular, the book suggests focusing on 1) the technological frontier to foster innovation in specific sectors; 2) the way in which technological advances can be transformed into reliable adaptations in specific places, a process the book refers to as contextualisation. In both cases, Sabel and Davies argue that the solution is within our reach, not through top-down global treaties or far-reaching agreements between nations, but through a) small vanguard clubs of companies and researchers that are ultimately open to the rest of the (initially less capable) global economy, and b) through grassroots initiatives, local innovation and community-orientated approaches.

A second important point to emphasise, in relation to the book, concerns the authors' paradigm that design strategies for an uncertain world. The paradigm proposed is based on what Victor and Sabel call Experimentalist Governance. Why Experimentalist? The authors believe that in a transformation such as environmental change, the assumption of a stable environment cannot be maintained almost by definition. Indeed, the background conditions of change are very often unpredictable. Actors should therefore realise that experimentation is the order of the day. Why Governance? Actors should use formal laws, informal procedures and shared conventions to develop collective capacities to experiment and learn from surprises. They should opt for flexible organisations that can be reconfigured as circumstances change. They should recognise that conception and execution cannot be meaningfully separated and drive them forward at the same time. They should make self-monitoring and mutual corrections routine and use doubt and disagreement to drive progress. Decision-making should shift from promulgating rules to issuing guidelines, recognising the impossibility of certainty.

The Experimentalist Governance brings Sabel and Victor to propose original learning processes, based on well-documented cases and in-depth applied research. Given that a large part of the technologies needed for deep decarbonisation does not exist yet, and the frontier for testing and deploying new technologies remains far on the horizon, deep action should be further encouraged. States, club of firms, researchers, workers and citizens - each with a specific knowledge that complement the others - should be invited to develop experiments and initiatives that stretch from the ground to the national and international level. These experiments should, in turn help the central government to find out which approaches work in which contexts, which overarching goals should be revised and which rules need to be adapted to local circumstances. Finally,

multilateral organisations should provide "umbrellas" for legitimising climate action.

Sabel and Victor's proposal is stimulating, fertile and has a huge potential. Adaptive, iterative, flexible and learning-by-doing processes appear appropriate for dealing with those cases were policy-makers must navigate uncertainty to create effective and resilient strategies. Policies should then be continuously adjusted based on real-world feedback and emerging data. Experimentalist Governance itself should be further experimented. For example, in healthcare policies dealing with pandemics and emerging diseases that create uncertainty in public health planning and provision; or in rapid technological advancements, such as in AI and biotechnology, with uncertainty in regulation, privacy, and ethical guidelines; or in tensions that create uncertainty in international trade policies. Last but not least, given the focus of the Development Cooperation Review, what comes to mind is the field of international relations, where geopolitical shifts and international conflicts are areas of uncertainty in foreign policy and interfere with the solidarity goal of the policy.

A third point to emphasise has to do, in fact, with international cooperation. Cooperation with other countries can help to accelerate experimentation by testing other methods and solutions. Sabel and Victor emphasise that it faces at least two interrelated challenges. The first is right-sizing the unit of analysis and intervention or 'sector' in which to experiment. Many examples seem to suggest that the narrower the focus, the greater the progress. However, under conditions of technological uncertainty, solutions are often derived from other, unrelated sectors, and openness beyond the usual boundaries is often essential. Therefore, innovation strategies need to be sector-based but not sector-bound. The second challenge has to do with the balance between commitment and openness. The challenge is that a coalition of governments and companies investing in experiments should be small enough and look like a 'club' to be committed and focussed, but at the same time, it must remain open to new like-minded participants from outside the club to ensure the legitimacy of the overall effort. Ensuring the autonomy of the experiments while making their results accessible to a wide audience is a complex task. It will certainly require additional experimentation and a wider analysis than the one we can afford here.

Similar political economy considerations are developed by the authors about contextualisation: how technologies can be applied in specific places. They stress that many of the gains from cooperation will actually come from something that goes far beyond exchanging and ranking best practices.[4] It should rather come from a joint in-depth review among internationally recognised peers. Those reviews should address the way in which place-based solutions have re-conceived the original technological applications.

It's essential to discuss this statement a little more, considering its substantial

impact on international cooperation and its alignment with widespread calls for significant reforms in the traditional cooperation framework.[5] International cooperation needs to recognise that convening at normative "tables" (often huge but not often representative and inclusive) to negotiate and ratify international agreements or to set standards, rules, and financial schemes in a top-down manner is not the sole method of collaboration. Equally, if not more, important, are explanatory "tables", which have proven indispensable in incertitude times. In these settings, various stakeholders gather to gather facts and information, foster knowledge exchange, and facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation among different regions and countries. These interactions aim to elucidate, clarify, and interpret experiences, thereby laying a robust analytical foundation for any guidelines or policies that might be needed.

These explanatory "tables" could, moreover, foster a more inclusive approach to international cooperation, especially crucial in turbulent times when reigniting dialogue is essential. We need to mitigate the risks of growing misunderstandings and negative cycles by encouraging types of international cooperation that create confident, inclusive spaces. In these spaces, detailed discussions about individual transition paths and strategies can take place. A key focus should be to re-engage in dialogue with and among developing countries, recognising their unique situations instead of disseminating externally defined standards which they had no role in shaping. This approach suggests the need for new, more representative and inclusive platforms, as many current ones fail to adequately reflect diverse global perspectives and do not even have sites for African or even other developing countries at all. As to say, playing Hamlet without the Prince.

In conclusion, "Fixing the Climate: Strategies for an Uncertain World" by Charles Sabel and David Victor presents a groundbreaking paradigm shift in addressing climate change. The book moves away from traditional global diplomatic efforts, advocating instead for a pragmatic approach grounded in experimental governance and contextualisation. It emphasises the importance of localised, adaptive strategies, and the role of experimental clubs and grassroots initiatives in driving sector-based innovation. The authors propose a new vision for international cooperation, one that focuses on sector-specific experimentation and knowledge sharing and peer reviews in contextualisation. This approach is not only relevant for climate policy but also for other areas of uncertainty, including international relations. The book is a compelling call to action, urging a rethinking of our strategies to address the pressing challenges of ecological transformation and international cooperation.

Endnotes

1. David Victor was one of the leading authors of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is a professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at UC San Diego and was recently elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences.
2. Sabel has a broad knowledge of law, social sciences, economics and political economy. His excellence as a leading thinker was recognised early in his career when he was named a MacArthur Prize Fellow. He studied at Harvard, became a prominent faculty member at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and later moved to Columbia Law School as Professor of Law and Social Sciences, a position he has held since 1995.
3. https://datacommons.one.org/climate-finance-files
4. "Ideas developed elsewhere can seldom be transferred unchanged from one place to another" pg. 163.
5. For example those that are known under the headings "Development in Transition" or "Global Public Investments".