

# From bottom up, bureaucrats elevate climate change as priority

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From the highest point on a small island nation in 2001—a bridge just a few feet above water—an International Monetary Fund economist immediately recognized its vulnerability to natural disasters and sea-level

rise.

After completing a two-year residency there, he became one of the first staff members to discuss [climate risks](#) in a report to IMF executives and its governing board, and as a senior IMF official years later considered climate change globally to be a "macro-critical issue."

Such experiences help explain how climate change has risen rapidly to the forefront of international organizations' agendas in recent years despite member states' disagreement on how to address the issue, according to new research co-authored by Richard Clark, assistant professor of government in the College of Arts and Sciences.

The study is among the first to systematically examine how institutional change can occur from the bottom of a bureaucracy up. Clark is the co-author with Noah Zucker, assistant professor of international relations at the London School of Economics, of "[Climate Cascades: International Organizations and the Prioritization of Climate Action](#)," published in the *American Journal of Political Science*.

The research finds that climate has gained priority through a bottom-up process driven by bureaucrats who learn about its importance in highly vulnerable countries, then spread that knowledge across an institution as they rotate to other countries and are promoted.

"Bureaucrats can reorient international organizations to tackle climate change more aggressively even when powerful member states are hesitant to do so themselves," Clark said. "Staff can set the agenda in such a way that they begin to push member states in the direction of change."

Most research on international organizations has focused on the top-down influence exerted by states and managing directors, the authors

said. Those dynamics remain important, they said, but should not overshadow the role of bureaucrats as powerful agents who can pave the way for high-level policy change.

One recent example: In a significant shift from its traditional lending programs, the IMF last year established the Resilience and Sustainability Trust, offering financing to help vulnerable countries prepare for long-term challenges including [climate change](#) and pandemics.

To investigate bureaucrats' influence in international organizations, Clark and Zucker tracked mentions of climate risks in so-called Article IV reports produced from 2000 to 2018 by IMF economists, following routine surveillance visits to member states. The reports assess risks to a target country's economic stability and make [policy recommendations](#), potentially influencing policy choices and investor behavior.

Their analysis, which also incorporated [a database](#) of climate-related disasters, showed that between 2010 and 2018, the number of countries with an Article IV report discussing climate increased nearly five-fold. The climate mentions originated in smaller, more vulnerable regions (such as Pacific island nations) before swiftly spreading to larger, wealthier countries.

"Since the early 2000s, climate has evolved at the IMF from an issue rarely discussed to one of broad interest as bureaucrats have increasingly cited it as an issue warranting action," Clark said.

The scholars next tracked the [career paths](#) of more than 70 Article IV report authors, using LinkedIn and IMF documents. They found that a low- or mid-level bureaucrat's prior field experience in a highly vulnerable nation was a "powerful predictor" that they would continue raising climate concerns, even after rotating to countries where the threat was less immediate.

"They were much more likely, after having been in a very climate-vulnerable country, to talk about climate in their future assignments," Clark said. "This learning process sticks with them, as opposed to just being a one-off case."

Complementing their data analysis, the researchers interviewed several current and former IMF officials (not identified to preserve anonymity) who offered anecdotal support for their bottom-up theory. The researchers believe the theory applies to any expert bureaucracy that makes recommendations to members, and where staff are systematically rotated—and they expect [international organizations](#) to pay greater attention to climate moving forward.

"The number of climate disasters is only going to increase, so bureaucratic exposure to [climate](#) events should also increase," Clark said. "Our theory would certainly anticipate more of this learning, and if anything, an acceleration of the trend."

**More information:** Richard Clark et al, Climate Cascades: IOs and the Prioritization of Climate Action, *American Journal of Political Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/ajps.12793](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12793)

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