Call it Kyoto Syndrome, but each year for the past few decades we hear hopeful things about the upcoming negotiations for the "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change." These discussions usually take place in some far-flung world capital, but they seem to always result in a nothing sandwich. In 2009, President Obama embarrassed himself with a last-ditch flight to Copenhagen to try to hammer out something meaningful, ultimately to no avail.

This year, hopes seem to be higher than normal that something might actually get accomplished in Paris in December. But should we really get excited about the potential? Or is the environmental community misplacing its efforts on the international stage on a fruitless path, when better options could be available?

In a new article for Georgetown International Environmental Law Review (PDF), Ruth Greenspan Bell tackles the question of whether or not a meaningful international agreement is either feasible to achieve or likely to make a difference, if one were to actually get signed. She argues strongly against the current "comprehensive" approach, questioning the assumptions underlying international talks to date:

> Negotiators have, apparently, uncritically accepted the proposition that a huge basket of climate-related issues—each of them very complex and requiring for their execution the cooperation of many parties with often wildly disparate views—can (indeed, must) be resolved in one comprehensive agreement. They also assume that such agreements, should they be signed and ratified, will lead to assured changes in the GHG emission practices of the many parties to the agreement.

It's worth reading the piece in full, but in short, Bell traces the history of multilateral agreements in the environmental context and notes the tremendous uncertainty about their effectiveness. And the greenhouse gas problem is arguably even more difficult to tackle than some of the past agreements that addressed single pollutants with often straightforward technology fixes or alternatives. She also points out how challenging the United Nations process is to reaching an agreement, with its requirement for consensus, the huge number of parties involved, and the incredible political diversity and needs of the countries at the table. And by focusing so much on ratification, the process is in danger of reaching an agreement with little enforceability or monitoring of compliance.

Meanwhile, time is running out on our ability to stabilize the Earth’s climate.

Given the urgency, Bell offers some alternatives that could actually achieve reductions sooner. To start, climate negotiators and advocates would have to forget about achieving a comprehensive agreement and instead bite off more manageable international agreements, akin to the progress made in the international weapons arena. For example, major emitter nations could come to terms on pollution targets among themselves; developing countries could negotiate over reduced amount of emissions reductions; and bilateral agreements, such as the recent one between China and the U.S., might pave the way for future agreements between other countries.

I believe that much of the solution to global climate change will come locally, from technology, policy, and financing innovations that happen within places like California, China and Germany. But at some point soon we will need a global approach to limiting carbon to reflect the true cost of this pollution to our economy, health, and environment. I’d much prefer that climate advocates engage in that process in a way that will actually achieve results, rather than spinning their wheels on the international stage each year. Bell offers an approach that I hope advocates will consider, before they waste yet another opportunity in Paris.