

Coalitions in global climate change negotiations

By Carola Klöck & Paula Castro

Summary

- ◆ While the international climate change negotiations have always been based on coalitions, the number of negotiating groups has increased dramatically since around 2005, with most (developing) countries participating in several coalitions.
- ◆ While more coalitions may make it harder to find compromises simply because more actors are actively involved in the discussions, it is not clear to what extent coalitions cooperate with one another and thus mitigate this effect.
- ◆ As many of the new coalitions tend to be thematically or regionally more focused, more countries may feel that their positions are better represented.
- ◆ Despite this, smaller and poorer countries—those that tend to join more coalitions—may struggle to coordinate within the increasing number of groups to which they are members. Negotiators—particularly from smaller countries—should become more aware of these potential implications of participating in many coalitions.

Coalitions in the UNFCCC negotiation

Like all multilateral negotiations, the international climate change negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are based on coalitions or alliances. Rather than as individual countries, Parties to the UNFCCC tend to participate in the negotiations within groups of countries. We use the term coalition to refer to

any group of countries that puts forward common proposals in the negotiations.

Coalitions serve two main functions. First, they reduce complexity; negotiations become more manageable when a handful of groups interact rather than almost 200 individual countries. Second, they improve the bargaining power of their members. When pooling their resources, countries can participate more effectively in the complex climate negotiations; additionally, a larger number of countries behind a specific position gives this position more weight.¹ As such, coalitions are of particular importance to smaller and poorer countries that individually lack negotiating capacity and bargaining power.²

While coalitions were thus a defining character of the UNFCCC negotiations since their inception, the landscape of climate coalitions has changed dramatically over the course of the negotiations. While only a handful of coalitions were active in the early years up to 2005, the negotiations since have seen a dramatic increase in the number of country groups involved. Since the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol and negotiations for a subsequent agreement, a large number of new coalitions has formed, notably within the group of developing countries. At the same time, the “old” coalitions persisted, so that we now have a range of partly overlapping coalitions active in the climate change negotiations.

In this policy brief, we trace all groups of countries that have been active in the climate change negotiations and map out the diversity of these groups and their membership. We then discuss the implications of this fragmented landscape of climate coalitions for the overall negotiation dynamics and outcomes, and for climate justice in particular.

Mapping coalitions and coalition membership

Coalitions over time

Figure 1 maps out all coalitions that have intervened in the negotiations as a group according to reports by the Earth Negotiation Bulletin (ENB).

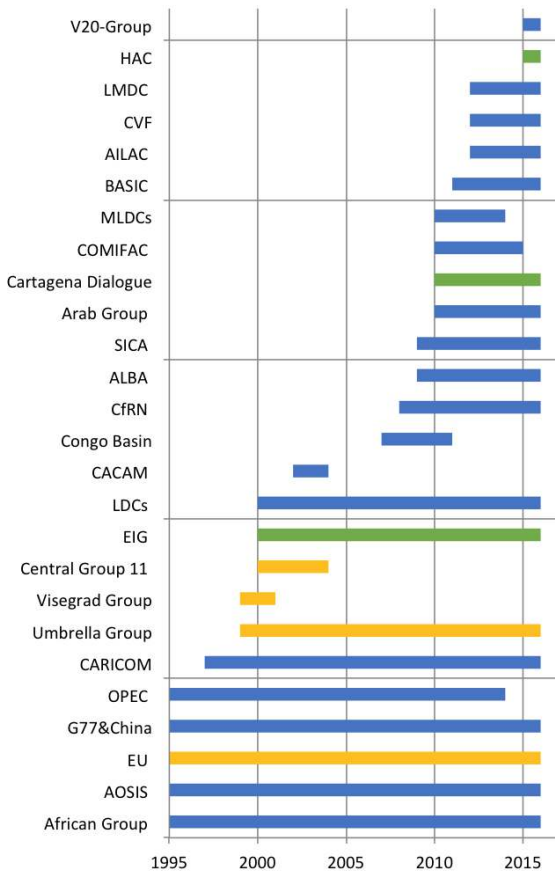


Figure 1: Coalitions in the climate change negotiations. Coalitions with only developing country members are in blue; coalitions with developed country members only are in yellow; coalitions with mixed membership are in green. Based on ENB reports of the negotiations.

Three trends can be observed. First, there is a clear increase in the number of coalitions after 2005, that is, after the Kyoto Protocol had entered into force and negotiations started to revolve around a successor agreement. While five coalitions were active at the very first Conference of the Parties (COP1) in 1995, 19 different coalitions intervened in the negotiations at the 2015 Paris climate summit (COP23).

Second, coalitions tend to persist once they are formed. Of the 26 coalitions that are recorded in the ENB reports, only seven ceased their activities. In other words, new coalitions form in addition to older groupings rather than replace them.

Third, most coalitions formed within the group of developing countries. In particular the “new” coalitions are often regional groups that consist almost exclusively of developing countries, such as the Congo Basin, the Arab Group, or the Association of Independent Latin American Countries (AILAC). In contrast, developed countries largely operate within just two groups—the EU (which is itself Party to the UNFCCC) on the one hand and the Umbrella Group (formerly JUSSCANNZ) on the other. Eastern European countries additionally had active coalitions (Visegrad and Central Group 11) during a brief period in the late 1990s/early 2000s, but then joined the EU. Finally, very few coalitions have mixed membership, notably the Environmental Integrity Group (EIG) that includes both non-Annex I and OECD member countries.³

Membership

Figure 2 displays how coalition membership across the world has evolved from the year 2005 to 2015. The maps show how many coalitions each country is member of in those two years, with darker colours reflecting more coalition memberships.

The maps reflect the growing number of coalitions in the climate realm; while on average countries were members of around two coalitions in 2005, this number has increased to almost four coalition memberships in 2015.

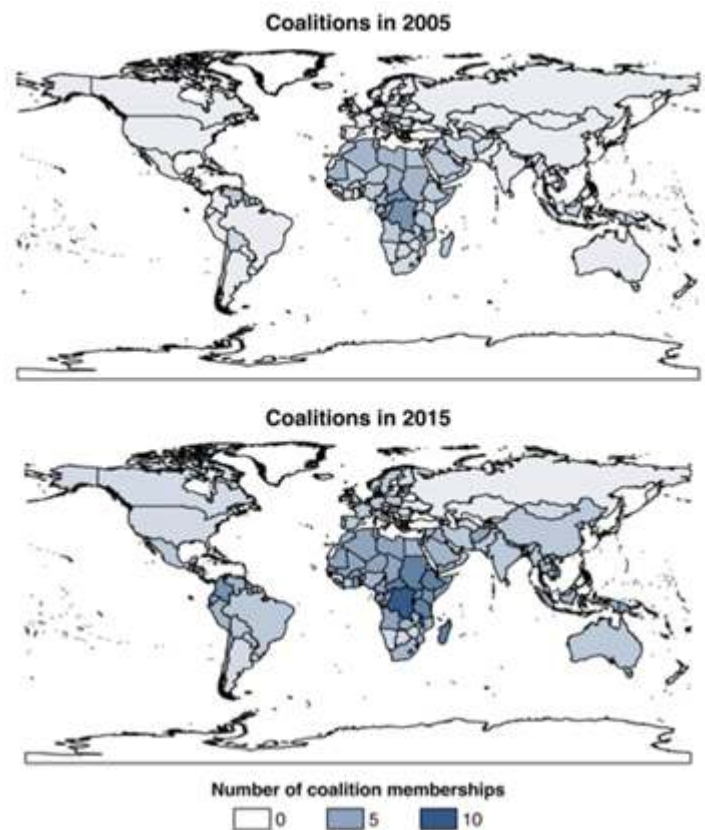


Figure 2: Evolution of coalition memberships over time.⁵

Coalition membership varies across countries, though. The industrialized Annex I countries tend to restrict their activities to only one or two coalitions. In contrast, the Democratic Republic of Congo was active in 10 coalitions in 2015.⁴

Countries in the global South tend to join more coalitions in the climate change negotiations. This pattern was even stronger in 2015: it is mostly developing countries that establish and join new coalitions in the climate change negotiations. Furthermore, even within the group of developing countries, we find that it is poorer countries, countries that are more vulnerable to climate change, and countries that generate less greenhouse gas emissions per capita that tend to join more coalitions—presumably because they depend to a larger extent on the support of others to make their voice heard.

Implications for the negotiations

What does the increasing fragmentation of climate change negotiations imply for the negotiation dynamics and outcomes on the one hand, and procedural justice on the other?

With regard to overall negotiation dynamics and negotiation outcomes, the presence of ever more coalitions may make it presumably harder to find compromises and reach agreements. In practice, however, the positions of individual coalitions may not diverge that strongly—the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), the Vulnerable 20 (V20), AOSIS and LDCs for instance tend to have similar positions and support each other.

In addition, given that many of the new coalitions are thematically or regionally more focused, more countries may feel involved and willing to provide input because now they can look for the most appropriate forum to have their own national positions represented. For example, countries that have large forests may join the Coalition of Rainforest Nations, while vulnerable countries may join the CVF. Now, such specific topics do not need to be agreed upon in a larger group such as the G77 & China.

With regard to procedural justice, as discussed above, smaller and poorer countries tend to join more coalitions than their larger and richer counterparts. Although the former also benefit the most from joining forces with like-minded countries, it is as yet unclear how they benefit from and deal with membership in multiple coalitions. On the one hand, it is plausible that multiple memberships make participation in the negotiations even more difficult because coordination costs increase. Small country delegations struggle to coordinate with multiple groups

and to attend all coordination meetings. For example, at COP23, small island states, Least Developed Countries, the African Group and G77 & China met twice every day, while other groups met every day. For a typical developing country, this easily amounts to at least six hours of coordination meetings only.⁶

On the other hand, countries may not be equally active in all coalitions in which they are formally a member. Multiple memberships also mean multiple venues to promote one's national position and to find allies. From this perspective, more coalitions mean more influence—if coalitions support each other.

Policy recommendations

Despite its potentially profound impact on the climate change negotiations, the changing landscape of climate coalitions has not yet been studied at length.⁷ At this point, we therefore do not know how and why new coalitions form or how they impact the overall negotiations as well as the strategies and influence of individual countries. More research is clearly needed. This research should in particular pay attention to how the negotiators themselves experience and evaluate the changing character of the negotiations.

Even if we do not know how the fragmentation into ever more coalitions affects the overall negotiations, it is likely that it has an effect. The negotiations should acknowledge this effect and actively debate what role coalitions play, including how they help or hinder the participation of individual countries.

Finally, countries themselves should take stock of their coalition membership(s) and reflect on how their participation in several groups helps or hinders their active engagement in the climate change negotiations.



Photo credit: Flickr/UN climate change

Acknowledgements

This policy brief has benefited from comments from Pawel Pustelnik, Jeremy Moulton and Johanna Forster.

Funding from the Thyssen Foundation (grant Az. 50.17.0.025PO) made it possible for Carola Klöck to attend COP23 in Bonn in 2017.



INOGOV is funded by COST, European Cooperation in Science and Technology (Action IS1309).

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References and endnotes

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2. Williams, M. (2005). The Third World and Global Environmental Negotiations: Interests, Institutions and Ideas. *Global Environmental Politics*, 5(3), 48–69.
3. Current members of the Environmental Integrity Group are Liechtenstein, Monaco and Switzerland (Annex I countries) as well as Mexico and the Republic of Korea (non-Annex I countries).
4. These coalitions were: the African Group, Cartagena Dialogue, Central African Forest Commission, Climate Vulnerable Forum, Coalition for Rainforest Nations, Congo Basin Countries, G77 & China, High Ambition Coalition, LDCs, and the Like-Minded Developing Countries.
5. Castro, P. (2017). Relational Data between Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, version 2. Available online at: Harvard Dataverse, 1 July 2017.
6. See the Daily Programme for 6 November 2018, Document Number FCCC/2017/II/OD/1. Available online at <http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2017/cop23/OD/od01.pdf>. This also aligns with the authors' observations and conversations at various UN-FCCC meetings.
7. See e.g. Blaxekjær, L. Ø., & Nielsen, T. D. (2014). Mapping the narrative positions of new political groups under the UNFCCC. *Climate Policy*, 15(6), 751–766. Carter, G. (2015). Establishing a Pacific Voice in the Climate Change Negotiations. In G. Fry & S. Tarte (Eds.), *The New Pacific Diplomacy* (pp. 205–220). Canberra: ANU Press

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