

Coalition Dynamics in Climate Negotiations: Levelling the Playing Field for Small States?

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Although the global negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are based on consensus and the equality of Parties, they are far from a level-playing field. Power asymmetries exist not only between North and South, but also between large and small countries.

Smaller states, who may have only a handful of delegates present at the yearly Conferences of the Parties, are disadvantaged in at least two ways: First, with only a few delegates on site, it is difficult to cover all the meetings, negotiations and consultations that often take place simultaneously. And second, with limited human resources, it is difficult to follow and understand the various, often technical, agenda items, from deforestation to bunker fuels to climate finance. Negotiation theory suggests that coalition-building can help address such resource limitations and thus help to overcome or at least reduce power asymmetries. By pooling resources and expertise, small countries can make their voice heard, as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) has powerfully demonstrated in the climate change negotiations.

Smaller countries, many of which are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change—such as many AOSIS members—thus depend on cooperation and coalition-building within the complex climate negotiations to defend their interests. While UN negotiations have always functioned through coalitions and country groups, the UNFCCC negotiations have seen a large increase in the number of coalitions over the past years. A plethora of partly overlapping, mostly interest-based coalitions has emerged, including BASIC, the Coalition for Rainforest Nations or the Climate Vulnerable Forum, among many others. Such proliferation of coalitions may turn out to be an obstacle for the voices of small states to be properly represented at the negotiations, as they lack the resources to participate in and coordinate with the different groups.

What does the emergence of new and overlapping coalitions mean for procedural justice in the negotiations? Do these coalitions help smaller and less powerful countries to find allies and to navigate the ever-growing UNFCCC agenda? Or do they instead present an additional challenge for them, since it becomes more difficult to participate in and coordinate with a growing number of groups?

The proposed research agenda seeks to understand negotiation dynamics with a focus on the implications of coalitions for power asymmetries and fair representation at the negotiations. After first mapping the evolution of the coalitions, their purpose and membership over time, the second aim of the project is to analyse the degree of cooperation and conflict between the groups with help of network analysis, with a particular focus on the role of small states. In a third step, interviews with delegates and negotiation observers will be used to shed light on how the proliferation of coalitions has affected the (perceived) influence that small states exert in the overall negotiations. and thus the equity and fairness of the negotiations.