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Research Brief: Multilateral Blocs in Global Climate Change Negotiations

According to the UNFCCC (2014), at least nine multilateral negotiating blocs are consistently involved in the international climate change negotiations. Pressure is mounting on the parties to implement the content of the Paris Agreement from COP21 in 2015 in the commitment period beyond. As so many countries are participating, multinational negotiating blocs have never been more important. With the recent arrival of several new negotiating blocs, the “UNFCCC regime is clearly becoming more complex and fragmented organisationally” (Blaxekjaer and Nielsen, 2014: 11). Despite this increase in the number of relevant actors, the focus of existing literature on blocs in climate negotiations remains heavily lopsided.

Predictably, the longstanding blocs have attracted most attention. The European Union (EU) has garnered significant study (e.g. Sbragia and Damro, 1999; Vogler and Stephan, 2007), as it has wielded considerable influence and has long been seen as a leader (Groen et al, 2012). Other longstanding groups, e.g. the Group of 77 (G77) and China, and the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS) have also been analysed in depth (e.g. Kasa et al, 2008; Belis and Schunz, 2013; Ashe et al, 1999; Betzold et al, 2012). However, although part of the UNFCCC for as long as the aforementioned blocs, the African Group of Negotiators (AGN) has been overlooked, and remains poorly understood both academically and by policymakers (Roger and Belithatan, 2014). Other smaller blocs, in particular those from the Global South, such as the Independent Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC), have also garnered very little attention (Blaxekjaer and Nielsen, 2014).

Questions and concepts of climate justice make it imperative this attention imbalance be redressed as soon as possible. The UNFCCC historically has not dealt well with justice issues in its negotiating processes (Derman, 2014), meaning that too often the voices of states and blocs comprising the Global South have gone unheard. This is of particular concern

given the fact that many of these blocs are made up of those states considered to be most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, and least well equipped to put in place adaptation-based solutions in the coming century (Brooks and Adger, 2003). A thorough examination of the mechanics, dynamics, positions, roles and influences taken up and exerted by negotiating blocs from the Global South in the ways that they shape the political landscape of the UNFCCC is required to enable policymakers to engage more effectively with developing country coalitions. This could go a long way towards fostering significant improvement in the negotiating capability of developing countries, thereby removing some of the constraints on their ability to participate in an equitable manner (Makina, 2013) in future decision-making towards a global agreement to curb the effects of climate change.

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