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Climate Negotiations Under Scrutiny:
Is UNFCCC Decision-Making Up to the Challenge?

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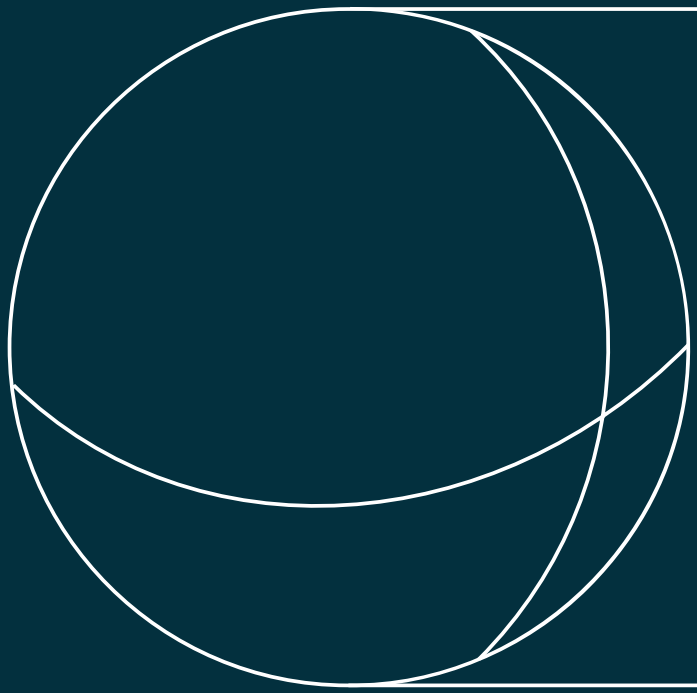

Abstract

The 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) plays a crucial role in global efforts to tackle the climate crisis. At annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and additional meetings, the international community gathers to advance climate policy and action. This report investigates the effectiveness and democratic character of the COPs, focusing on four specific challenges and the potential for reform therein: inequalities in party participation, involvement of non-party stakeholders, consensus vs. majority voting, and agenda streamlining. Overall, we find that options for reform are limited. While some smaller reforms are realistically achievable – such as streamlining agenda items and further capacity-building initiatives – larger reforms such as increasing non-party stakeholder engagement or moving to majority voting seem highly unlikely. The biggest stumbling block for any significant reform lies in the UNFCCC decision-making procedures, namely the requirement for consensus among the parties. This also limits the EU's options in promoting substantial UNFCCC reforms.

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Introduction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adopted in 1992 and in force since 1994, plays a crucial role in global efforts to tackle the climate crisis. The UNFCCC's main goal is to stabilise "greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system" (UNFCCC 1992, Article 2). Its membership is nearly universal – 198 parties: 197 states plus the European Union (EU). To reach the convention's targets, a sophisticated decision-making structure was set up: the main governing body is the Conference of the Parties (COP), at which all parties meet annually.[1] COP meetings are chaired by the COP Presidency, which rotates among parties from the five UN regions. This means that COPs are hosted in a different location every year. The presidency works to facilitate consensus among parties and to raise ambition for climate action. Furthermore, there are two additional fora: the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) and the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA). These bodies support the COP process and meet twice annually (parallel to COP meetings and at 'intersessionals' held in Bonn in June every year).[2] Their work is supported by two further actors: The Bureau, which brings together 11 representatives from governing and subsidiary bodies as well as the different world regions, supports the intergovernmental process between COPs. The UNFCCC Secretariat, based in Bonn with 450 staff members, assists the parties, prepares reports, and provides expertise, among other tasks.

Is UNFCCC decision-making up to the challenge of tackling the climate crisis?

The objectives of the UNFCCC were further specified and operationalised during subsequent COPs, in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement sets the goal of holding global temperature increase to "well below 2°C" and pursuing efforts to "limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C" above pre-industrial levels (UNFCCC 2015, Article 2 (1) a). It is implemented mainly through national mitigation and adaptation efforts, formulated within Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). All the parties are expected to submit updated NDCs in 2025. In the same year, COP30 will take place in Belém under the Brazilian Presidency, with the objective of building momentum towards the Paris Agreement's targets. This is crucial considering that in 2024, the average global temperature exceeded the 1.5°C threshold for the first time (Copernicus 2025), and parties' commitments remain insufficiently ambitious (Climate Action Tracker n.d.). Therefore, despite the parties coming together for the thirtieth COP, the international community is far from achieving its targets. The question thus arises: Is UNFCCC decision-making up to the challenge of tackling the climate crisis?

1 Additional governing bodies were set up for parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and to the Paris Agreement (CMA). To simplify the text in this report, when we refer to COPs, we are referring to the meetings of all three bodies.

2 The work of these bodies has been further complemented by constituted bodies (such as the Adaptation Committee) and (now-concluded) ad-hoc bodies.

This report explores the extent to which the UNFCCC decision-making process is fit for purpose. We focus on the annual COPs and SBI meetings, as these are the main platforms for debate on reform among the parties and non-party stakeholders. Conceptually, we investigate two key aspects: (1) the effectiveness and (2) the democratic character of climate negotiations (Choi et al. 2024). The underlying assumption is that if the international community has not managed to develop effective solutions after more than 30 years of climate negotiations, then its decision-making format might require reform.

This report is based on qualitative analyses of three types of data. The first is an extensive review of the rich body of literature on the UNFCCC's functionality, its reform potential, and the role of different actors therein (such as Nasiritousi et al. 2025; Buylova et al. 2023; Bauer et al. 2020; Kinley et al. 2021; Müller et al. 2021; Obergassel et al. 2022; Vihma 2014; Depledge 2024). The second is an analysis of COP and intersessional documents, including: (a) 109 Earth Negotiation Bulletin (ENB) reports, spanning the period between COP21 (2015) and COP29 (2024); (b) 57 submissions to the UNFCCC and speeches given by parties (focusing on COP29 and SBI60 in 2024); and (c) six technical papers, reports, and notes prepared by the UNFCCC Secretariat. The third is an analysis of the insights shared by five interviewees (spanning UNFCCC, party, and non-party stakeholders) and reflections gathered during an informal stakeholder event (see the List of Interviews and Events at the end of this report). Using qualitative content analysis and NVivo software, we applied a deductive codebook centred around effectiveness and democracy (see Choi et al. 2024). To reduce complexity, this report focuses on insights regarding four major aspects of democratic and effective UNFCCC decision-making: (in)equality in party participation, non-party stakeholder involvement, voting procedures, and agendas.

According to the main findings of this report, the effectiveness of UNFCCC negotiations is significantly hampered by overloaded agendas and the consensus rule, which often leads to lowest-common-denominator decisions. In terms of democratic quality, the UNFCCC process allows all parties to be heard, yet asymmetrical power and unequal party participation affect equality between the parties. Our analysis also uncovers tensions between efforts to make UNFCCC decision-making more effective and efforts to make it more democratic – for example, when aiming to streamline agendas while also keeping the process inclusive and "party-driven." Thus, the overall potential for reforming UNFCCC decision-making is limited. It is unlikely that major reform proposals – such as a greater role for non-party stakeholders or a move to majority voting – will obtain consensus. Without trust among the parties and a shared will for reform, it is likely that the UNFCCC process will continue without major reforms.

In the next section, we explain the main challenges in UNFCCC decision-making. The third section compares the positions of key actors on democracy and effectiveness in the UNFCCC process. The fourth section explores the potential for reform across the four aspects on which this report focuses. The fifth section discusses the EU's role in shaping reforms within the UNFCCC, and the sixth and final section summarises our main findings.

Challenges in UNFCCC Decision-Making

UNFCCC decision-making faces several challenges pertaining to the large number of parties and the inequalities among them, non-party stakeholder involvement, consensus voting, and overloaded agendas. Guided by the ENSURED conceptual framework (Choi et al. 2024), we focus on these four aspects of the UNFCCC process – and particularly on COPs – due to their relevance in ongoing policy debates and in the academic literature.

Inequality in Party Participation

The major UNFCCC decision-making bodies usually meet twice per year: for the annual COPs, which receive the most (media and political) attention, and for the intersessionals. In order to follow all the technical and political negotiations, parties send in-person delegations to both meetings. Over the years, party participation has increased significantly (McSweeney and Viisainen 2024). Only 757 party delegates (alongside more than 3,000 other participants, such as observers and media representatives) attended COP1 in Bonn in 1995. At COP28 in Dubai in 2023, party delegate numbers reached an all-time high of 20,204 – alongside approximately 62,000 other participants. However, participation in these meetings remains unequal among the parties for at least two reasons.

Decision-making is characterised by a highly asymmetrical distribution of bargaining power.

First, previous research has pointed out significant capacity challenges faced by developing countries and least developed countries (LDCs) in particular, which often send smaller delegations to COPs. Inequalities stem from funding constraints, visa problems, language barriers, limited scientific and legal expertise, and personnel instability, among other factors (Fletcher 2021; Falzon 2021; Kaya and Schofield 2020; N. Chan 2021; Andrei et al. 2016; Schroeder et al. 2012). To address unequal capacities, a dedicated UNFCCC Trust Fund was set up to support developing country parties' participation. Civil society actors also support party capacities. Yet these measures are seen as insufficient, given that the Trust Fund (to provide one example) only supports two delegates for each eligible party or up to three delegates for eligible Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and LDCs.

Second, decision-making is characterised by a highly asymmetrical distribution of bargaining power. One source of bargaining power are individual parties' greenhouse gas emission responsibilities. China and the United States (US) are the top two emitters, responsible for more than 40 percent of global emissions, and thus their behaviour significantly impacts negotiations (Jiahan 2018; Liu et al. 2019). At the same time, emission responsibility also should be seen in historic and per-capita terms, which offers a more nuanced picture of shared responsibilities (Ritchie and Roser 2024).

Involvement of Non-Party Stakeholders

While UNFCCC decision-making traditionally focuses on the actions of the parties (the only actors with voting rights on formal decisions), non-party stakeholders also have a relevant role to play in implementing climate action. As such, non-party stakeholders that are formally admitted take part in COP meetings as 'observers' (Article 7.6, UNFCCC 1992; Draft Rules of Procedure, UNFCCC 1996). These observers are diverse, encompassing UN actors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cities, industry representatives, and others. The number of observers at COPs has grown significantly over the years: from 979 observers at COP1 to 13,278 at COP28, marking an all-time high (McSweeney and Viisainen 2024).

While the presence of non-party stakeholders has increased, possibilities for meaningful observer engagement remain limited.

While their presence has increased, possibilities for meaningful observer engagement remain limited. This has sparked a rich body of literature debating the roles of different types of actors (Thew 2018; Allan 2021, 2018; Bäckstrand et al. 2017; Nasiritousi et al. 2016; Kuyper et al. 2018; B. Zhao 2023; Teunissen and S. Chan 2024). Here, we focus on two particular challenges. First, the diversity of actors present at COPs (and beyond) is seen as a strength of climate negotiations. Yet the overrepresentation of observers from the Global North produces inequalities (UNFCCC 2024g). Furthermore, there are concerns about certain groups, such as the fossil fuel industry, influencing negotiations and delaying parties' actions (Nasiritousi et al. 2024). Second, the question of when observer participation in the negotiations is truly meaningful remains open. This includes (lack of) access to specific meetings and negotiators, as well as the order and allocation of speaking time (B. Zhao 2023; Bäckstrand et al. 2021). While non-state actors play an important role in climate governance (e.g., emission reduction and technological innovation), their integration into the UNFCCC framework remains limited (S. Chan et al. 2018; Hermwille 2018).

Consensus vs. Majority Voting

Consensus is the default decision-making mode within the UNFCCC. Yet no formal definition of the meaning of consensus within the UNFCCC exists, which leads to varying practices among meeting chairs from the presidency and beyond (Kemp 2015; Rietig et al. 2023; Vihma 2015). The fact that consensus is usually interpreted as "no expressed opposition" gives the parties a de facto veto right, which in turn gives the UNFCCC "a very high level of legitimacy as no country can be ignored" (Rietig et al. 2023, 222). At the same time, the consensus requirement often creates lowest-common-denominator positions and prevents parties from taking decisions when just a few states refuse to endorse them.

When we consider the origins of the 1992 Convention, it is clear that consensus was not intended to be the only option for decision-making. For example, the convention allows for majority voting on amendments to the convention "[i]f all efforts at consensus have been exhausted" (UNFCCC 1992, Article 15.3). Furthermore, the UNFCCC tasked the first COP with adopting the Rules of Procedure (UNFCCC 1992, Article 7.3). Rule 42 of the Draft Rules of Procedure foresaw two-thirds majority voting as the last-resort principle for substantive decisions, and majority voting for procedural decisions. However, the parties did not succeed in adopting the proposed Rules of Procedure during COP1 (1995) due to disagreements over voting procedures. More specifically, Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing countries stood against majority voting (Vihma 2015, 62). After more than 30 years, the Rules of Procedure have still not been adopted. COP and its subsidiary bodies function on the basis of the initially proposed Rules of Procedure, except for Draft Rule 42. Thus, despite the convention's intention, majority voting did not become a decision-making procedure within the climate regime (Depledge 2024; Vihma and Kulovesi 2012).

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Overloaded Agendas

The observation that COPs have evolved into mega events is not only linked to the increased number of attendees, but also to the growing workload and thematic scope of the conferences (Allan and Bhandary 2024; UNFCCC 2024d; Buylova et al. 2023; Vihma 2014; Müller et al. 2021). The high workload limits the time available for negotiations and puts a strain on delegations: smaller delegations struggle to be present at all the meetings and have their voices heard, while larger delegations face increased coordination needs. Furthermore, overlapping agenda items jeopardise the goal of achieving coherent negotiation outcomes.

The origins of these problems lie in COP management. First, consensus-based decision-making often delays the adoption and conclusion of agenda items. Second, while the inclusion of new topics – such as social issues or loss and damages – in COP agendas over time reflects relevant political, economic, and social developments (Allan and Bhandary 2024), the number and diversity of issues debated across different bodies increases the complexity of negotiations. Third, fluctuations in the performance of COP presidencies affect the efficiency of negotiations on agenda items, and the annual rotation of presidencies leads to a lack of strategic coordination (Walker and Biedenkopf 2020; Vihma 2014; Vihma and Kulovesi 2012; Monheim 2016). Analysts have also raised concerns about presidencies promoting specific interests (Transparency International 2024; Buylova et al. 2023; Müller et al. 2021).

Major International Actors' Positions on UNFCCC Reforms

This section analyses the positions on effectiveness and democracy in UNFCCC decision-making among major international actors and groups,[3] as outlined in the ENSURED conceptual framework (Choi et al 2024). Due to the importance of consensus in the UNFCCC, we first explore fundamental differences in positions among all the actors. Second, we zoom in on the specific positions of major actors and relevant negotiation groups, namely the EU, the US, China, Russia, India, Brazil, the African Group, the Arab Group, and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). We chose these actors in order to capture diverse positions, and also due to their importance in international climate politics and wider geopolitics. The comparison shows that while consensus exists on the need to take climate action (with a few exceptions), the level of commitment to the UNFCCC process varies significantly.

Fundamental Differences in Positions

A first difference in the parties' positions lies in the question of responsibility for the climate crisis. Historically, developed countries in North America and Europe have caused a significant share of global anthropogenic CO_2 emissions (Ritchie and Roser 2024). Acknowledging this, the 1992 UNFCCC established that parties should act on climate change "in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities" (CBDR-RC), and that "developed country Parties should take the lead" (UNFCCC 1992, Article 3.1). Similarly, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol differentiated between countries that committed to emission reductions and those that did not. While still acknowledging CBDR-RC, the 2015 Paris Agreement commits all parties to act, which reflects the need for broader action given new emissions realities. Yet narratives around CBDR-RC still persist in debates on who should take the lead (Hurrell and Sengupta 2012, 473–74; Petri and Biedenkopf 2020). Developing countries, for example, frame their commitments as conditional on those of developed countries (Pauw et al. 2020). This reflects the interests of current but not historic major emitters (such as China and India), who do not want to be held to the same standards as developed countries (Li et al. 2024; Wunderlich 2020; Ella 2017).

The 2015 Paris Agreement commits all parties to act, which reflects the need for broader action given emissions realities.

A second difference is related to variance in capability and vulnerability. On the one hand are those countries that do not suffer the consequences of the climate crisis as intensely, that have the capacities to adapt, and

3 Two limitations are important here: First, not all actors take explicit positions on specific reforms, so their positions had to be deduced from other materials. Second, individual positions – such as membership in regional groups, negotiation group(s), and ad-hoc coalitions – had to be contextualised (UNFCCC n.d.-b).

that might even benefit from continued high-emission practices. On the other hand are those with fewer capacities and those that are highly vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis (ND-GAIN n.d.). In this context, SIDS have become particularly strong rhetorical actors in the UNFCCC, calling for a deeper acknowledgement of their vulnerability, more ambitious action by the parties, and stricter UNFCCC rules (Fletcher 2021; Corbett et al. 2019; Rasheed 2019). Related to this, developing countries remain dissatisfied with the UNFCCC process. They consider the amount of climate finance inadequate and would like to see more assistance provided through grants rather than loans (Ruiz-Campillo 2024; Siegele 2023; Obergassel et al. 2024). They are also dissatisfied with the eligibility procedures of international climate funds and with the stronger obligations and procedures being set up within the UNFCCC (van Deursen and Gupta 2024). As such, a significant obstacle to reform is the lack of trust among the parties and the persistent divide between the Global North and the Global South (Debeuf 2024).

A third difference relates to the extent of leadership and policy ambitions formulated by the parties domestically, as evident in NDCs, as well as during the UNFCCC negotiations (Tobin et al. 2018; Compston and Bailey 2016). High domestic ambitions and successful emission reductions have been a basis for leadership in the UNFCCC, following the principle of 'exemplary leadership' – a term often invoked in analyses of the EU's role in climate governance (Tobin et al. 2023; Wurzel and Connelly 2011). The US – under Democratic administrations – has acted as an important leader in the UNFCCC in the past, influencing key deals reached within the framework such as in Kyoto, Copenhagen, and Paris (Eckersley 2020; Christoff 2010). However, even under these administrations, the US was hesitant to delegate authority to the UNFCCC – a hesitation which weakened agreements. Under Republican administrations – George W. Bush and Donald Trump – the US has obstructed cooperation within the UNFCCC (Ettinger and Collins 2023), including by not ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and withdrawing from the Paris Agreement. Whereas China's positions in the UNFCCC were purely defensive in the 1990s, it became more flexible in the 2000s (Jinnah 2017) and adopted ambitious reduction targets in 2020 (X. Zhao and Qi 2022). Yet China can hardly be considered a leader in the climate regime, since its orientation remains rather rigid and it concentrates on defending its own interests (Eckersley 2020; Qi and Dauvergne 2022; Obergassel et al. 2018). Furthermore, other actors have notably blocked certain reforms, such as the Group of Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs) led by China and India (Obergassel et al. 2024), as well as Saudi Arabia (Depledge et al. 2023).

Actor Positions

The following table compares individual positions on democracy and effectiveness within the UNFCCC across major actors in climate negotiations.

Table 1: Major Actors' Positions on Democracy and Effectiveness in the UNFCCC

Continued on the next page.

Indicators	Positions
European Union[4]	
Effectiveness	Recognises the importance of transparency and accountability; calls for binding mechanisms and finance to be delivered by all (party and non-party) actors who are able to do so; calls for mainstreaming COP agendas.
Democracy	Sees majority voting as an opportunity; promotes non-party stakeholders and openness to observers while recognising the importance of informal/closed consultations; emphasises transparency in decision-making.
Overall position	Emphasises multilateral solutions; calls for (more) ambition; assumes responsibility (e.g., providing climate finance) but also affirms responsibility for all (i.e., collective commitment).
United States[5]	
Effectiveness	[Obama] Hesitating over far-reaching and unequal accountability vs. [Trump] disengaging from the process (i.e., withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement).
Democracy	[Obama] Hesitant about majority voting; [Obama] promoting non-party stakeholder activities vs. [Trump] claiming unfair treatment of the US compared to other actors (e.g., China).
Overall position	Significant changes in positions over time: [Obama/Biden] ambitious to lead but also hesitant about authority transfer vs. [Trump] claiming that the Paris Agreement is disadvantageous for the US, and lacking ambition.
China[6]	
Effectiveness	Sees the importance of CBDR and leadership from developed countries; emphasises party-driven processes and voluntary instruments; expresses concerns over access to funds for developing countries.
Democracy	Argues that negotiations should focus on core issues; emphasises indigenous peoples' knowledge; involves various Chinese stakeholders, including businesses.
Overall position	Makes ambitious domestic commitments and offers strong UNFCCC support but little external leadership (supports the status quo); increasingly engaging with the Global South.
Russia[7]	
Effectiveness	Rhetorically supports mitigation but has limited interest in high ambition (due to its fossil fuel reliance and exports); calls for commitments from developing countries (not only developed countries).
Democracy	Domestic civil-society context is repressive, which leads to limited Russian NGO engagement at COPs and limited independence from state positions; opposes certain terminology (e.g., gender diversity).
Overall position	Engages with the UNFCCC process in a limited way; considers climate policies less salient; emphasises economic development; uses UNFCCC as a multilateral forum to counter Western dominance.

4 Earsom and Delreux (2023); ENB; EU (2024); Oberthür and Groen (2017).

5 ENB; Ettinger and Collins (2023); Jotzo et al. (2018); White House (2024, 2017).

6 China (2024); Christoff (2010); Ella (2017); ENB; Gao (2018); Hilton & Kerr (2016); Li et al. (2024); Wang et al. (2021).

7 Compston and Bailey (2016); ENB; Henry and Sundstrom (2021); Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen (2018).

Continued from the previous page.

Indicators	Positions
India[8]	
Effectiveness	Argues for the importance of climate justice, CBDR, and fair burden sharing; emphasises NDC diversity; calls for increased climate finance and capacity-building (more action from developed countries).
Democracy	Emphasises consensus-based decision-making and inclusive negotiations; expresses concerns over asymmetrical representation of developing countries; emphasises indigenous knowledge.
Overall position	Supports multilateralism/UNFCCC; ambitious in terms of domestic climate action and providing Global South leadership; emphasises historical responsibility/CBDR.
Brazil[9]	
Effectiveness	Argues that developing country efforts are dependent on funding by developed countries; opposes stricter compliance rules; ambition varies [Bolsonaro was less ambitious, Lula is more ambitious].
Democracy	Strategic use of consensus decision-making by the BASIC group; recognition and influence of civil society actors varies [Bolsonaro was less supportive; Lula is more supportive].
Overall position	Held a conservative stance as a developing country until 2018 (emphasised CBDR); [Bolsonaro] aligning with US/Trump vs. [Lula] emphasising ambition/leadership with regard to COP30.
African Group[10]	
Effectiveness	Calls for flexibility in reporting for developing countries; calls for improved funding access; emphasises the importance of developed countries' financial commitments.
Democracy	Emphasises consensus-based decision-making and a party-driven process; criticises unequal participation and lack of inclusiveness; displays limited openness to certain issues (e.g., gender diversity).
Overall position	Disappointed over lack of meaningful action at COPs; focuses on the needs of developing countries.
Arab Group[11]	
Effectiveness	Calls for flexibility in reporting for developing countries (multiplicity in NDCs); calls for increased funding by developed countries.
Democracy	Insists on consensus-based decision-making and party-driven negotiations; expresses doubts about non-party stakeholder engagement (e.g., questioning IPCCC expertise).
Overall position	Emphasises CBDR and equity principles; has the impression that developed countries are moving away from commitment (distrust); opposes top-down processes; obstructs the process at times.
Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)[12]	
Effectiveness	Calls for time-schedule reform at COP meetings; calls for increased resources for implementation.
Democracy	Emphasises the importance of a party-driven process and inclusivity; calls for more non-party stakeholder involvement (e.g., the private sector); emphasises a balanced focus on issues (including special needs).
Overall position	Expresses deep concern over slow progress; calls out mismatches in rhetoric and action; calls for the reinvigoration of the multilateral process.

8 Carmona et al. (2022); ENB; India (2016, 2022, 2024a, 2024b); Mohan (2017).

9 Albuquerque (2019); Castro Pereira and Viola (2022); Cia Alves et al. (2021); ENB; La Rovere (2019); SUR Group (2024); Vieira (2013).

10 African Group (2024); ENB; Mantlana and Jegede (2022).

11 Arab Group (2024); Depledge, De Pryck, and Roberts (2023); Djoundourian (2021); ENB.

12 AOSIS (n.d., 2024); Corbett et al. (2019); ENB; Fletcher (2021); Klöck et al. (2024).

Unexploited Reform Potential in the UNFCCC

This section explores the unexploited potential for reform in terms of increasing the democracy and effectiveness of UNFCCC decision-making, with a particular emphasis on COPs. We focus on the four specific challenges outlined in the second section: (1) inequalities in party participation, (2) non-party stakeholders' involvement, (3) voting procedures, and (4) agenda streamlining. For each challenge, academics, observers, and policymakers have presented ideas for UNFCCC reform. In these debates, it is essential to move beyond the positions of major actors, since the consensus rule in UNFCCC decision-making gives every single party the power to suggest, obstruct, or silence reform. In practice, this has meant that actual reforms within the UNFCCC have been highly limited. Therefore, in this section, we often consider reflections on the possibilities for reform rather than concrete action towards reform.

Addressing Inequality in Party Participation

Inequalities in party participation represent fundamental challenges to the party-driven and inclusive nature of UNFCCC negotiations, and hence their democratic character. Potential for reform lies in two related and not mutually exclusive ideas: first, fundamentally rethinking the way COPs are organised, in terms of both participation numbers and format; second, enhancing measures to support equal participation opportunities for all states. The following paragraphs discuss reflections on reform from the academic and policy communities.

Rethinking COP Organisation

Various academic and CSO observers have argued that the size of COPs hinders progress, calling the annual meetings "too big to be effective" (Berwyn 2024; Club of Rome 2023; Nasiritousi et al. 2025; Müller et al. 2021). Developed states, such as the US, have also acknowledged that COPs are too large (Berwyn 2024). One of our interviewees noted that the costs of organising COPs were increasingly getting "out of hand," thus limiting the number of countries that could afford to host a COP (Interview 5). The idea of sizing down COP has been debated by the UNFCCC Executive Secretary, among other actors (Martins Morais et al. 2024). Yet COP30 is expected to once again bring together at least 50,000 participants (Marsden 2025). While the idea of sizing down COPs seems self-evident at first, there is a fundamental tension between effectiveness and democracy concerns when it comes to reducing the number of participants – for at least four reasons. First, how

Inequalities in party participation represent fundamental challenges to the party-driven and inclusive nature of UNFCCC negotiations.

would a decision on (non-)participation be taken? One of our interviewees discussed the possibility of reforming the overflow party-badge system (Interview 1).[13] However, another interviewee raised concerns about how to design this process in a fair way (Interview 5). Second, the broad range of participants beyond climate experts is considered important to raise awareness and guarantee sectoral mainstreaming (Obergassel et al. 2022; Buylova et al. 2023; Interview 5). Third, reducing participation numbers is likely to impact non-party stakeholders in particular. One of our interviewees believes that CSOs would be most affected by this change (Interview 1). Fourth, the fact that more people are attending can be seen as a success, indicating wide support for and awareness of climate action among actors across sectors (Buylova et al. 2023, 5; Interview 5). Taken together, these factors make it difficult to implement reform.

Another idea relates to the change in COP format, since negotiations are in the implementation phase of the Paris Agreement. Policy analysts have suggested disentangling the different COP spaces (i.e., formal negotiations, side events, public spaces) towards more targeted, sectoral conference spaces (Obergassel et al. 2022). Others see potential for a mix of "[s]maller annual COPs," complemented by "more frequent intersessional meetings which focus on targeted deliverables" (Club of Rome 2023). Benito Müller et al. (2021) propose a division of events according to which an annual, high-level flagship event would be organised separately from smaller annual COPs held in Bonn. However, one key limitation of this reform is that participation opportunities for observers would be more limited (Interview 1). Another barrier to implementing such a reform is the fixed regularity of mandated events (UNFCCC 2024b).

Related to this, one idea for reform which analysts have discussed is the possibility of moving certain UNFCCC meetings to a virtual format (Buylova et al. 2023): this is already standard practice for informal consultations between COPs. Past COPs have supported (public and restricted) platforms to enable participants to join certain events online (UNFCCC 2023a). Assuming that all participants have stable internet and electricity access, moving certain formal meetings to a virtual format is conceivable. Such a shift could relieve the pressure on dense COP and intersessional agendas, limit parties' participation costs, and reduce the carbon footprint of COP events. Yet doubts remain over whether virtual negotiations can do justice to the trust-building that happens in real-life negotiations. One interviewee voiced doubts over whether virtual platforms could fully replace physical meetings (Interview 3).

In addition, analysts have proposed holding future COPs in a permanent location such as Bonn, which is a familiar space for the intersessional meetings (Müller et al. 2021; Club of Rome 2023; Vihma and Kulovesi 2012). One recent example of this scenario was COP23 in 2017, when Fiji acted as COP President, but the conference itself was held in Bonn. In line with this suggestion, small islands states proposed a "permanent host country for the COP after 2015," with meetings to be hosted in Bonn even as the

13 Overflow party badges are given to COP attendees who are linked to party delegations but are not part of the official delegation, who thus gain access to the restricted negotiation zones (beyond observer access).

principle of rotating presidencies is maintained (AOSIS n.d.). A permanent location could limit problems associated with travel, accommodation, and visa procedures, among other factors. One interviewee acknowledged that a permanent location would "reduce the chaos" associated with COP organisation (Interview 5). Furthermore, this change to COP organisation could counter the expectation that each host country will organise the "biggest and best COP" (Berwyn 2024). At the same time, the rotating presidency gives ownership to the parties and showcases the priorities of different world regions. In view of these factors, it is unlikely that the parties will agree on the arrangements necessary to choose Bonn as the permanent location for meetings and give up the prestige associated with hosting a COP.

Enhancing COP Participation

Other reform considerations relate to enhancing party participation. One strand of possible actions concerns the enhancement of developing countries' capacities to participate in COPs. This includes increasing the budget of the UNFCCC's Trust Fund for Participation in the UNFCCC Process (UNFCCC 2024f), as parties have raised "concerns over how smaller delegations could find the resources to participate" in UNFCCC meetings (ENB, COP28#3). One interviewee recalled discussions on financial support for observer participation in which developing countries called for any additional funds to contribute to supporting parties (Interview 3). Visa processes, accommodation costs, and other factors associated with travel represent further concerns. One repeated reform request made by parties and analysts has been to strengthen the provision of affordable hotels in the host-country agreements, which are concluded for each COP Presidency (this was also mentioned in Interviews 2 and 5). Furthermore, tackling barriers to meaningful participation is essential (Corbett et al. 2019; N. Chan 2021; Fletcher 2021). For example, one interviewee emphasised how NGOs support the negotiation capacities of smaller parties (Interview 3). Possible steps towards achieving such reforms include further investments in informational materials, capacity-building programmes, and negotiation training (Buylova et al. 2023; N. Chan 2021; Gupta and Allan 2023; UNFCCC n.d.-c).

Tackling barriers to meaningful participation is essential.

A second strand of actions relates to the inclusiveness of COP meetings. The composition of smaller committees has been a frequent point of contention at past COPs. This includes criticism of the lack of "geographic balance" on committees (ENB, COP26#Summary) and the fact that restricted committee composition "prevent[s] certain parties from fully participating" (ENB, COP28#4). Least developed and developing countries have repeatedly stressed the importance of inclusivity in informal meetings (ENB, COP23#9, COP24#12, COP28#8). Developing countries have also called for the expansion of virtual participation opportunities to facilitate broader participation in events (ENB, COP27#4). Some parties have particularly criticised informal negotiations, noting that "informal informals would only be effective if all Parties participate" (ENB, COP28#8) or that "Presidency consultations became 'increasingly less inclusive'" (ENB,

COP26#Summary). This also relates to the question of how the most powerful actors influence negotiations – for example, through informal consultations and outreach. As such, one avenue for action would be the development of best practices for building trust among all parties, to be spearheaded by negotiation facilitators and COP presidencies (Walker and Biedenkopf 2020).

A third strand of action concerns the question of how the UNFCCC process – and ambitious actors therein – deal with limited engagement or obstructive behaviour on the part of certain parties, particularly powerful actors such as the US and China. The importance of high-emitting countries cooperating on climate cannot be denied, and their leadership at past COPs is well established (Parker et al. 2017). Although China's support for the UNFCCC has been relatively consistent, for the most part it does not favour a more ambitious, stronger form of multilateral climate cooperation (Li et al. 2024; Wunderlich 2020). Under Donald Trump's second administration, the US is likely to shift towards obstruction or inaction. In early 2025, Trump signed an executive order to withdraw the US – again – from the Paris Agreement (among others) and to cease financial commitments to the UNFCCC (White House 2025). While formal reform is difficult given such a constellation of actors, two informal avenues are available to balance obstructionist participation in the COP process: (1) coalition-building and leadership on the part of other actors, such as the EU and groups of climate-vulnerable countries (e.g., replicating the High Ambition Coalition); and (2) increased engagement with relevant non-party stakeholders, such as US sub-national and private entities (Jotzo et al. 2018; see also the next section).

It seems unlikely that major reforms to COP organisation will be implemented.

In sum, it seems unlikely that major reforms to COP organisation will be implemented. Yet smaller steps (such as best practices for trust-building and increased resources for least developed and developing countries) are more likely to be implemented in order to tackle inequalities in party participation, which could help promote both effectiveness and democracy.

Towards Meaningful Engagement for Non-Party Stakeholders

Non-party stakeholders acting as UNFCCC observers do not have the right to vote. However, non-party stakeholder and observer involvement in the UNFCCC process was promoted and institutionalised throughout the 2010s, including via the 2011 Momentum for Change initiative, the 2014 Lima–Paris Action Agenda and the launch of the Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action, and the 2016 launch of the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action. In March 2025, the UNFCCC's Global Climate Action portal listed climate commitments (such as emission reductions) made by 43,144 actors, including countries, cities, regions, and companies (UNFCCC n.d.-a). Yet the multitude of non-party initiatives and the increased number of observers present at COPs each year raises questions regarding the democratic potential and effectiveness of non-

party stakeholder involvement. The UNFCCC Secretariat noted that "there is a need to move beyond mere quantity of participation to quality of participation" for observer engagement (UNFCCC 2024e, 6). This section focuses on two reform debates regarding (1) unequal participation opportunities for different types of stakeholders and (2) the available channels for 'meaningful' engagement in the UNFCCC process.

Tackling Non-Party Stakeholder Inequalities

The first concern is how to address the stark geographic imbalance between observers present at COPs (Buylova et al. 2023; Thew et al. 2022). Between 2012 and 2023, the percentage of COP observers from the Western Europe and Others Group ranged between 48 and 68 percent, compared to African observers, who made up between 9 and 20 percent (UNFCCC 2024c). Actors such as Brazil have requested that "greater representation be secured for observers from developing country organizations" (ENB, SBI60#Summary). In this context, the UNFCCC Secretariat suggested adjusting the allocated quota of observer spots, pavilion spaces, and side events (UNFCCC 2024e, 2024c). However, such an adjustment might raise objections from parties who prefer to maintain the presence of specific interest groups – for example, national private-sector actors. Yet as one interviewee argued, changing the quota would not necessarily translate into a shift in participation, since other barriers (such as hotel prices) remain (Interview 3). Importantly, changes to the "current admissions procedure in place for observer organizations requir[e] formal approval by Parties" (UNFCCC 2024e, 14).

The second concern relates to the role of certain lobby groups and vested interests, such as businesses reliant on fossil fuels (Nasiritousi et al. 2024; Stoddard et al. 2021). One interviewee discussed the problem of imbalance in the access granted to private sector actors as compared to civil society actors (Interview 1). Another referred to observer perceptions that pavilions are being used as "greenwashing spaces" by fossil fuel industries (Interview 3). On this point, CSO observers and academics have suggested two types of reform. On the one hand, they recommend increasing transparency with regard to COP participation. COP28 stands out as the first COP to make public a full list of the names and affiliations of COP participants (RINGO 2025; UNFCCC, n.d.-d), which shows that calls for reform have had an impact. On the other hand, another type of reform would involve introducing a new code of conduct for COPs. This would put pressure on actors with conflicts of interest and thus reveal motives for COP attendance (as mentioned in Interview 1). However, one interviewee questions this point, arguing that the presence of fossil fuel lobbyists at COPs did not necessarily impact governments. The same interviewee also warned that any exclusion of actors could be interpreted as "anti-democratic" (Interview 5). Another interviewee reflected on previous debates on this point: while the Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries recommended a discussion on this subject, developed countries such as the US stressed the importance of "having all stakeholders at the table" (Interview 3).

The third concern considers the differences in capacities and resources available to observers (B. Zhao 2023; Bäckstrand et al. 2021; Thew 2018; Kuyper et al. 2018). Many observer organisations lack funds to pay for hotels in COP locations (as mentioned in Interviews 1 and 3), while others lack English proficiency or personal networks, among other things (UNFCCC 2024c). Ideas for tackling these challenges include increasing the funds available for observer organisations from developing countries, increasing capacity-building programmes provided by the secretariat and within cross-observer networks, extending virtual participation opportunities (UNFCCC 2024e), and pushing for stronger host-country agreements to guarantee affordable housing (Interview 1) and increase personal safety at COP events (Thew 2018). Among other potential reforms, the possibility of offering a trust fund for observers from developing countries was debated at the June 2024 SBI meetings. During these debates, the EU and the US "objected to establishing a new trust fund for developing country observer participation," referring to "challenges with resourcing existing trust funds" (ENB, SBI60#Summary). In sum, there is little room for major reforms aimed at tackling inequalities across all three of these aspects, as no clear consensus exists on any of these issues.

Engaging More Meaningfully

Many parties support the role of non-party stakeholders in the UNFCCC, for example by emphasising the importance of indigenous knowledge (e.g., India) and youth groups (e.g., the EU). Mapping the different modes of engagement (UNFCCC 2023b), the highest standard for meaningful engagement would be for non-party stakeholders to be full members of the UNFCCC process, contributing to decision-making alongside the parties and possibly even voting. Various observers have called for such a role, such as when indigenous people called for "the right to full partnership and participation in all UNFCCC bodies" (ENB, COP27#1). However, many parties oppose a stronger role for observers, such as when the "LMDCs, opposed by several others, requested deletion of references to observer submissions" (ENB, COP23#8). Considering the emphasis states place on the 'party-driven' nature of the UNFCCC process, as well as the diversity of observer organisations, such wide-ranging reform seems highly unlikely. The only domain in which the situation is different is in specific UNFCCC work strands, namely in thematic expert groups (UNFCCC 2023b).

Developing best practices for presidencies and presiding officers could strengthen observers' voices during COP events.

While a shift to full membership or equivalence to party status for non-party stakeholders is considered unlikely, other channels for engagement with potential reforms still remain. First, parties could consider changing the speaking time alloted to non-party stakeholders at UNFCCC meetings, which is often limited and left to the end of plenary sessions. In the past, the EU asked for a change to the order of speakers (so that observer statements would take place after regional groups and before individual parties), but developing countries did not agree (Interview 3). One interviewee also pointed out that speaking opportunities were often at the discretion of presiding officers, which resulted in observers having

no opportunity to speak (Interview 1). Developing best practices for COP presidencies and presiding officers could strengthen observers' voices during COP events. Similar soft recommendations were also included in the draft SBI conclusions (UNFCCC 2024a), namely "improving time management" and "increasing intervention opportunities for observers."

Second, reforms could clarify observers' access to different negotiation zones and meetings during COPs. One interviewee reflected on the difficulties observers face in accessing meeting rooms and participating in actual deliberations, as opposed to plenaries (Interview 1). Various ENB reports show that observers are unhappy about their restricted access to negotiation zones, citing an NGO representative who felt that "rabblerousers are being kept away from negotiators" (ENB, COP23#8). On this point, the parties are divided. For example, Bolivia argued for "all negotiations to be held in open sessions," while the EU supported a "maximum of transparency of the UNFCCC process, while preserving its effectiveness," thus keeping some meetings closed (Nasiritousi and Linnér 2016). In 2024, the secretariat recommended establishing new zones and differentiated badge systems that would allow observers to engage in more focused participation, either attending side events and exhibits or following the actual negotiations (UNFCCC 2024e). While this type of reform could once again limit the opportunities available to observer organisations, this idea does have some potential, as it could help to manage the number of participants at COP mega events.

One fundamental issue with any potential reform within the UNFCCC is the question of whether consensus-based decision-making should continue.

Taken together, these reform ideas illustrate the tension between enhancing democracy by giving diverse stakeholders a (stronger) voice and maintaining effectiveness by reducing the number of stakeholders and holding informal meetings with selected actors when necessary. In sum, the development of best practices for UNFCCC meetings seems more likely than formal steps towards reforming observer engagement.

A Path Towards Majority Voting

One fundamental issue with any potential reform within the UNFCCC is the question of whether consensus-based decision-making should continue. The absence of majority voting offers some advantages for the UNFCCC's decision-making process. One is that if decisions are taken by consensus (meaning that all parties have either agreed or chosen not to disagree), then the parties are more likely to implement those decisions (Depledge 2023; Kemp 2015). Moreover, the consensual adoption of a decision increases its political weight and thus creates pressure on the parties to abide by the decision. Two of our interviewees emphasised the importance of ownership of the decisions taken (Interviews 2 and 5). Another advantage of consensus-based decision-making is respect for national sovereignty and the basic idea of equality between states within the UN system (Interview 5).

However, the absence of majority voting also negatively impacts the effectiveness of UNFCCC decision-making, as it prevents changes to the status quo even when an overwhelming majority supports such a change, with only a few parties opposed. In addition, no formal definition of consensus exists within the UNFCCC (Depledge 2024; Rietig et al. 2023). This gives chairs of negotiations significant discretion. In some cases in the past, chairs have "gavelled through a limited amount of opposition" (Vihma 2015), essentially declaring a decision adopted even when a few states objected. Although such steps may make decision-making more effective, to some extent they call into question the equal participation of parties, since some views may not be considered. Here again we see a tension between effectiveness and the democratic character of the process.

The shortcomings of consensus-based decision-making have led to attempts at shifting to majority voting: so far, however, all of these attempts have been unsuccessful (Depledge 2024). One possibility is that the parties finally adopt the Rules of Procedure, which include a concrete form of majority voting. The parties discuss approving the Rules of Procedure every year, but these discussions only reveal their persistent inability to agree. Another possibility is to establish a majority-voting rule by amending the convention. The advantage of this solution is that the consent of all parties would not be necessary, since a three-quarters majority can be used as a last resort for amendments to the UNFCCC (although an amended convention would still be subject to domestic ratification by all the parties). In 2011, Papua New Guinea and Mexico proposed such an amendment (UNFCCC 2011), but they did not obtain the necessary support for their proposal. Although meetings of UNFCCC bodies occasionally address issues of consensus and majority voting, these issues occupy a relatively marginal position on the agenda. In our analysis of ENB documents (2015–2024), we found only very few references to voting rules, and these usually occur when parties insist that "all outcomes be agreed by consensus" (ENB, COP29#8, in this case Iran and Qatar).

When we consider state preferences on the issue of consensus (Kemp 2015; Vihma 2015), the probability of reforms in support of majority voting is not very high. Taking the 2011 debate as a point of reference, state reactions were relatively mixed. At the time, Costa Rica, Guyana, Suriname, Sierra Leone, Colombia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and Australia showed "a degree of openness towards the proposal" (Vihma 2015, 63). AOSIS, the BASIC Group (composed of Brazil, South Africa, China, India), the LDCs, and the Umbrella Group (encompassing Australia, Canada, the UK, the US, etc.) had no common position. Nevertheless, China and India support consensus-based decision-making in the long term. Developed countries (such as the US) have been hesitant about majority voting for fear of being "overridden" by large coalitions such as the G77 (Kemp 2015, 769). The EU's position can be seen as supportive, in line with its general support for authority transfer, yet it is merely "lukewarm" when it comes to pushing for concrete reform (Vihma 2015, 63). Based on related debates, it is unlikely that Russia will support majority voting, as it has used its veto to prevent the adoption of agendas before (see Rietig et al. 2023). Actors opposed to this change include Bolivia and Venezuela (Kemp 2015,

766), as well as Saudi Arabia (Depledge et al. 2023). Asked directly about reforms on consensus voting, one interviewee explicitly stated that they do not believe majority voting "will ever happen" (Interview 5).

However, the possibility of a shift to majority voting procedures on some issues in the future cannot be completely ruled out. The worsening of the climate crisis, combined with the UNFCCC's shift from rulemaking to more operational decisions, could pave the way for such a move. One interviewee pointed to the fact that majority voting is used in other similar-sized fora (Interview 2). Naturally, such a change is more likely if majority voting were to apply only to selected issues rather than to all issues (Kemp 2015). Another interviewee also sees majority voting on "relatively routine decisions" (such as the next COP location) as an option to make decisions "efficient, without being exclusive" (Interview 5). Finally, the parties could informally agree on a wider understanding of consensus, according to which a decision is accepted even if some parties abstain (Rietig et al. 2023).

Shorter Agendas, Higher-Quality Negotiations

The UNFCCC Secretariat has noted that "effective agenda-setting is crucial to ensuring the efficiency, as well as the transparency and inclusivity of the UNFCCC process" (UNFCCC 2024d, 3). As such, the parties have debated various instruments with which to streamline the agenda and thus enhance the quality of negotiations, including at SBI60 in June 2024 (UNFCCC 2024g). On the one hand, most parties generally agree on the need to increase efficiency (e.g., AOSIS, Belgium/the EU, LDCs, Norway, the Arab Group, and South Africa), mentioning workload (e.g., "an unmanageable number of agenda items" (SBI60, Belgium/EU)) and capacity issues faced by delegations. On the other hand, some parties are sceptical of actual reforms: "Enhancing efficiency must not come at the cost of lack of implementation of the principles and provisions in letter and spirit" (SBI60, Bolivia/LMDCs). Importantly, the principles of inclusive agenda setting and a party-driven process (i.e., the parties take the primary role in decision-making) were emphasised by parties across groups (Australia/Canada, the EU, LDCs, LMDCs, Norway, and the Arab Group).

"Enhancing efficiency must not come at the cost of lack of implementation of the principles and provisions in letter and spirit" (SBI60, Bolivia/LMDCs).

When we consider the concrete reform proposals discussed in the SBI (and beyond), we find at least four ideas for enhancing agenda management – each with a different likelihood that steps towards reform will be taken. The first idea concerns decisions on new agenda items. Following the Draft Rules of Procedure, all parties can propose to add or delete agenda items ahead of each COP: the final inclusion of agenda items is determined by consensus (Vihma and Kulovesi 2012). As one interviewee noted, "the right to propose an agenda item was being abused more and more" (Interview 5). Reforming this process could help to save time by avoiding

long consultations (as also mentioned in Interview 2). Developed country parties in particular have called for reform (Australia/Canada, Belgium/EU, Japan, Norway, and the US). The Arab Group has emphasised transparency as "essential" in agenda setting, "while avoiding the introduction of any new agenda items not agreed upon by all parties or requested" (SBI60, Arab Group). In sum, there seems to be some openness towards reform.

The second idea for reducing workload concerns the conclusion of agenda items, which follows the same consensus rule as the adoption of new items. As one interviewee describes the situation, the number of agenda items should decrease automatically as mandates are fulfilled over time (Interview 5). Yet recent years have shown that "even agenda items that could be closed down for efficiency purposes are kept open as parties mistrust each other's motives" (Nasiritousi et al. 2025, 7), which makes actual reforms unlikely. In terms of parties' positions, developed country parties such as Australia, Canada, the EU, Japan, and Norway call for "making space" (SBI60, Belgium/EU) and "closing dormant agenda items" (SBI60, Japan), such as those related to the Kyoto Protocol. However, LMDCs and the Arab Group strongly oppose this, using a CBDR narrative to underscore the importance of the "historic perspective of climate action" (SBI60, LMDC). AOSIS sees the merit of closing agenda items to make "more time for meaningful engagement on other issues," but it cautions against "simply slashing agenda items and mandates" (SBI60, AOSIS). Thus, we observe a tension between democratic principles (i.e., fair participation among the parties in promoting certain agenda items) and the effectiveness of the process.

The third reform idea relates to merging and clustering agenda items. Parties have voiced various ideas about how to combine agenda items, for example on transparency (SBI60, AOSIS) or finance (SBI60, Japan, Norway). One interviewee reflected on the possible added value of clusters, yet emphasised the practical difficulties involved in coordinating agenda items across negotiation bodies (Interview 2). Speaking to this point, several parties have made suggestions on designing a fair process for agenda coordination, such as giving a stronger role to the Bureau as a body with balanced regional representation for agenda clustering (SBI60, LDC), and appointing the same co-facilitators for agenda items addressed across UNFCCC bodies (SBI60, US, Australia/Canada). However, the LMDC Group and the Arab Group oppose the clustering or merging of agenda items, warning that this "would dilute the discussions for certain agenda items" (SBI60, Arab Group). One interviewee also noted that while clustering is useful in principle, it does not solve the actual problem of having too many agenda items (Interview 5). As such, the expectations for successful reform and meaningful progress in this area are limited.

The fourth reform idea relates to multi-annual agenda planning, which would involve reforming the COP Presidency's role as well as thematic coordination across presidencies – such as the ongoing troika "Roadmap to Mission 1.5°C." The EU, Norway, and the UK support these reflections (SBI60, Belgium/EU, Norway; ENB, SBI60#Summary). However, this would require changes to the practice of COP Presidency selection (shifting to a longer-term nomination process to allow for coordination) as well as to the Rules of Procedure regarding agenda adoption. These required

institutional changes make this reform proposal difficult to implement. However, depending on how the current troika concludes at COP30, there might be space for such arrangements in future – if more parties see value in such an arrangement.

Alternative Pathways?

In terms of alternative pathways for global governance transformation (Choi et al. 2024), a major move away from the UNFCCC (and towards a new institution with broad membership) seems unlikely. While the UNFCCC process is often criticised, the convention has nevertheless achieved significant compromises (such as the 2015 Paris Agreement), and its near-universal membership is a core strength. This is not to say that the creation of climate clubs has not been widely debated in academia and policymaking circles. Yet there are significant concerns about the inclusiveness and effectiveness of such initiatives (Falkner et al. 2022; Hovi et al. 2019; Sprinz et al. 2017). Coalition-building at COPs has been essential in gathering ambitious actors. In this context, past COPs have seen coalitions of the willing form around specific topics. For example, at COP26 in 2021, many (but not all) parties and certain non-party stakeholders committed to various coal-related initiatives (UNFCCC 2021). This illustrates the fact that despite a lack of consensus, minilateral initiatives can take shape within the UNFCCC framework.

While the UNFCCC process is often criticised, the convention has nevertheless achieved significant compromises.

The EU's Role in UNFCCC Reforms

Scholars have extensively debated the EU's leadership ambitions in global climate governance (Tobin et al. 2023; Çelik 2022; Oberthür and Dupont 2021; Walker and Biedenkopf 2018; Parker et al. 2017; Wurzel and Connelly 2011). These leadership ambitions are based on two elements. First, the EU pursues a multi-faceted climate diplomacy strategy, promoting climate ambition bilaterally (Biedenkopf and Petri 2019) and multilaterally within the wider climate regime complex, including the UNFCCC (Earsom and Delreux 2023; Oberthür and Groen 2017). As such, the EU's support for the UNFCCC process (Choi et al. 2024, Table 7) takes place both within and beyond the institution – the former by taking positions during negotiations, building coalitions, submitting proposals, and offering financial support; and the latter through bilateral diplomatic outreach.

The EU pursues a multi-faceted climate diplomacy strategy.

Second, as an "exemplary leader" (Wurzel et al. 2017), the EU sets high climate ambitions internally, develops innovative sectoral policies (for example, the EU Emissions Trading System), and takes the lead on climate finance (European Commission 2024; European Council 2024). This ambition is meant to inspire others to take similar action. However, some nuance is required here, since the EU's climate policies remain insufficient in reaching the Paris Agreement's targets (Climate Action Tracker n.d.). Recent years have also seen increased contestation of climate policies within the EU (Bocquillon 2024). While it missed the February 2025 deadline for submitting its updated NDC (though this was an expected delay considering the EU electoral cycle), the EU is projected to submit before COP30.

Importantly, leadership ambition does not necessarily translate into effective leadership. Other actors' perceptions of the EU's role matter. Previous studies have shown that "while the EU's high self-conception of itself as a climate leader is not matched to the same degree by potential followers, [...] the EU has been perceived to be one of the top three most influential actors in climate negotiations" (Parker et al. 2017, 248). When we discussed leadership perceptions with interviewees, the majority described the EU as an active negotiator in the UNFCCC. One interviewee commented that the EU is able to broker a progressive middle ground at COPs (Interview 5), while two others emphasised the EU's role as an advocate for non-party stakeholder engagement in the UNFCCC (Interviews 3 and 4; in contrast to Interview 1).

Nevertheless, interviewees and analysts have also voiced doubts about the EU's ability to lead. For example, the EU follows a less innovative strategy than other international actors, such as the US (Interview 5). As a particular type of international actor, it also has significant coordination needs within the UNFCCC and related institutions (Bäckstrand and

Elgström 2013; Earsom and Delreux 2023), which can impact its ability to respond quickly. At the same time, such doubts are also matched by expectations that the EU will take a stronger role by "fill[ing] the gap left by Trump" (Pisani-Ferry et al. 2025) and by mobilising coalitions with developing countries (Interview 3).

To what extent is the EU able to shape reforms? It has aspired to act as a leader in climate negotiations and, despite some critical voices, it is often recognised as *one* of the leading actors. Yet its ability to shape reforms is fundamentally conditioned by the perceptions and actions of other players. The EU can promote specific reforms or policies and can do so within wider coalitions (such as the High Ambition Coalition), but in a system of consensus-based decision-making, it suffices for one player to obstruct the process. As one interviewee noted, "no one has the clout to override a minority" (Interview 5). Furthermore, the above sections have demonstrated the limits of the EU's efforts. While spearheading observer engagement or promoting agenda streamlining, the EU has not necessarily pushed for all of these reforms within the UNFCCC.

The EU's ability to shape reforms is fundamentally conditioned by the perceptions and actions of other players.

Conclusion: The Future of UNFCCC Decision-Making

This report has explored the extent to which the UNFCCC decision-making process is fit for purpose. We investigated the effectiveness and democratic character of COPs, focusing on four challenges: (1) inequalities in party participation, (2) involvement of non-party stakeholders, (3) voting procedures, and (4) agenda streamlining.

We have found that the effectiveness of UNFCCC negotiations is significantly hampered. Overloaded agendas create time pressure and risk incoherent negotiation outcomes. This risk is compounded by fluctuation in the practices and trust-building performance of various COP presidencies. Furthermore, given the consensus rule, there is a tendency to make decisions based on the lowest common denominator, which jeopardises the ambitious action necessary to tackle the climate crisis. Regarding the democratic character of the negotiations, we have found that the process allows all parties to be heard (irrespective of their economic power or emissions levels), yet this mechanism alone does not balance out the asymmetrical power of major actors such as China and the US. This is further complicated by unequal party participation. While large delegations have high coordination needs, small delegations without expertise or language competence struggle to keep up with the demands of negotiations. Furthermore, the number of observers who attend COPs does not necessarily translate into quality engagement. Our analysis reveals that efforts to make UNFCCC decision-making more effective sometimes conflict with efforts to make it more democratic – for example, when seeking to streamline agendas while keeping the process inclusive and 'party-driven.' The need to balance (and negotiate) such trade-offs can hamper the reform process.

The biggest stumbling block for any significant reform lies in the UNFCCC voting procedures.

Given all this, what is the potential for reform in UNFCCC decision-making? Overall, our assessment is that options for reform are limited. We agree with Alexandra Buylova et al. (2023) in their identification of some "low-hanging fruit," mostly in the domain of procedural questions (agenda and time management) and capacity-building (unequal participation among party and non-party stakeholders). Addressing participation inequalities is a relevant example of steps towards reform that can synergistically advance effectiveness and democracy in UNFCCC processes. Yet when it comes to the bigger questions – such as granting a larger role to non-party stakeholders or moving towards majority voting – we see little room for reform. Among other actors, the EU has promoted a greater role for non-party stakeholders in the negotiations. However, the biggest stumbling block for any significant reform lies in the UNFCCC voting procedures: to achieve far-reaching reforms, a consensus decision among all parties would be required. In most scenarios, at least some actors will have an interest in maintaining the status quo. Without trust among the parties and a shared will to make the UNFCCC process more efficient, it is likely that COPs will continue without major reforms.

Looking ahead, this report represents another contribution to the ongoing debates around UNFCCC decision-making and COP reform. Yet "[w]e haven't reached the end of discussing the future of COP" (Richard Klein, cited in Bauer et al. 2020). The fact that the US, under the second Trump administration, has announced its intention to exit the Paris Agreement again (White House 2025) might boost climate action in advance of COP30, provided other parties – such as the EU – step up their commitments to the UNFCCC process. However, this situation could also increase the divisions among parties by, for example, aggravating climate finance gaps, and thus negatively affect the negotiations. Irrespective of Trump, the upcoming COP in Belém will mark a special moment in UNFCCC history: this will be the 30th COP, taking place a decade after COP21 in Paris and a year after the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C target has been exceeded. Taken together, this might create momentum for climate action, opening space for small steps towards UNFCCC reforms.

This year's COP30 might create momentum for climate action, opening space for small steps towards UNFCCC reforms.

List of Interviews and Events

Number	Date	Interviewee/Event	Location
1	01/28/2025	Non-party stakeholder	Online
2	01/29/2025	UNFCCC Secretariat stakeholder	Bonn
3	02/05/2025	UNFCCC Secretariat stakeholder	Online
4	02/11/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
5	02/14/2025	Party stakeholder	Online
6	02/13/2025	Multi-stakeholder event	Brussels

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