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Fostering Reflection, Dialogue and Collaboration among Actors at the UN Climate Change Conferences

IASS POTSDAM

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Summary

At their core, the UN Climate Change conferences known as "COPs" are the primary international venue for negotiating how countries should act and co-operate to avoid dangerous climate change. The 2015 Paris Agreement is its most recent notable success. Although the climate negotiations are a state government-led process, the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) community has increasingly recognized the need for dialogue and engagement with non-governmental stakeholders in acknowledgement of the critical role they will play in mobilizing and implementing climate change solutions. Non-governmental stakeholders include science, civil society, the private sector, and local communities.

Such non-governmental stakeholders also attend the COP in large numbers, where they aspire to influence the negotiations, make their voices heard, and generally contribute to advancing climate action. Indeed, the COP has tremendous convening power, annually bringing together tens of thousands of people working on diverse aspects of climate policy, science, and advocacy in one place at the same time. Despite this enormous collective potential, a communication culture has developed that relies heavily on conventional presentation and panel formats that are not conducive to mutual engagement and learning. We therefore see a need to reinvigorate the COPs through new formats of dialogue that can better foster collaboration and co-creation of climate change solutions.

Against this backdrop we make the following three recommendations to foster reflection, dialogue, and collaboration among diverse actors at the UN Climate Change conferences, focusing on the interactions that take place outside the formal negotiations. These recommendations are intended to be actionable by different types of meeting hosts at the COP, including observers, Party delegates, the UNFCCC Secretariat and the COP presidency.

■ Recommendation 1.
Create an enabling environment.
The setting of a meeting – both the physical surroundings and the collective mindset – sets an important tone. We therefore suggest fostering inclusive and participatory dialogue by limiting hierarchical setups like stages and establishing communicative ground rules that emphasize respect and mutual support.

■ Recommendation 2.
Use facilitation practices that support reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation.
A wide range of facilitation tools can be used to support the intentional design of a meeting. Fostering reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation can help a meeting go beyond exchange and allow for deeper insights and meaningful collaboration.

■ Recommendation 3.
Develop networks for systemic change in the culture of collaboration at the COPs.
Individual actors engaged in new forms of collaboration and dialogue should form networks and communities of practice to support each other as well as a greater transformation in the culture of collaboration at the COPs and within the wider climate community.

A unique setting: the UN Climate Change Conferences (COPs)

The UN is first and foremost an intergovernmental organization, meaning it is designed primarily as a forum for governments (who participate as "Parties"). In its founding charter, however, Parties to the UNFCCC commit to "promote and cooperate in education, training and public awareness related to climate change and encourage the widest participation in this process, including that of non-governmental organizations." Indeed, the COPs have included the participation of non-governmental actors (also referred to as "observers") since the beginning, and interest in participation by non-governmental entities has increased dramatically since then. Today the COPs bring together not only negotiators from around the world, but also thousands of non-governmental actors from diverse civil society organizations, including business, labour, indigenous peoples, research, youth and environmental organizations, and intergovernmental organizations.

The last COP (COP25) took place in Madrid in 2019 and was attended by 14,000 party delegates and 10,000 observers. Although some observers are directly engaged with the content of what is being negotiated, for many the value of the COP lies in its convening power – the benefit of having tens of thousands of people working on climate science and policy in one place at the same time (Kuyper et al. 2018). Indeed, the incredible number, diversity, and combined expertise of climate stakeholders at the COPs represent an enormous collective potential.

Participation by non-governmental actors in the formal negotiations at the COPs is very restricted; in many sessions those with "observer" badges are not even allowed in the room to observe. Speaking opportunities for non-governmental actors within the negotiations are limited to statements made by representatives of Constituencies, loose subgroups into which observers are organized. Parallel to the formal negotiations, there are a large number of spaces at the COPs that invite more active observer participation, including side events, and pavilions; these can be organized by the UNFCCC, countries, or observers themselves. However, within these spaces a communication culture has developed that is dominated by presentations and panels that are not conducive to discussion, dialogue, or mutual learning (Wamsler et al. 2020), as also acknowledged by initiatives like the Talanoa Dialogue (see p. 5). Concretely, a typical side event is held in the form of a 1.5-hour panel discussion on a specific theme, with high-level presenters from different organizations or governments plus a limited time at the end for a question-and-answer session with the audience. While the conventional side event format can be valuable for conveying information, it is very dominant, also among the spaces not managed by the UNFCCC. In combination with the sheer number of such events on offer, this leaves little space (physical or mental) to process and make meaningful sense of the vast amounts of information being presented. In this way the dominant communication culture fails to fully capitalize on the collective potential of the participants present. This raises the question: what complementary formats could help bridge this gap and lead to more productive interactions?

[1] Article 4(1)(i) of the 1992 Framework Convention

[2] The nine recognized constituencies within the UNFCCC are: Business and Industry NGOs (BINGO), Environmental NGOs (ENGO), Farmers, Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPO), Local Government and Municipal Authorities (LGMA), Research and Independent NGOs (RINGO), Trade Union NGOs (TUNGO), Women and Gender, and Youth NGOs (YOUNGO).

[3] "Official" side events are offered by the UNFCCC as a platform for admitted observer organizations to engage with Parties and other participants.

[4] E.g., at COP25, there were a total of 280 UNFCCC side events over 11 days, plus hundreds of additional events offered at spaces like pavilions.

A need for new forms of collaboration

The Talanoa Dialogue – bringing new values and formats into the UNFCCC landscape

Although the term "dialogue" is commonly used as a label for events within the UNFCCC landscape, in most cases it simply implies an exchange of views on a particular topic with expanded opportunities for participation as compared to the formal negotiations.[5] The format of a typical dialogue event at the COP, for example, does not necessarily look very different from that of a conventional side event. The Talanoa Dialogue was an exception to this. The Talanoa Dialogue process was unique within the UNFCCC landscape in three ways: the explicit attention it paid to the values it espoused, including transparency, inclusiveness, and mutual respect; the fact that the purpose of the dialogue was framed as being more than just instrumental (i.e., to raise climate ambition) but also to share stories, build empathy and trust; and the attention it paid to the formats of the dialogues themselves to support these values and goals.[6]

The mandate for the Talanoa Dialogue came from the 2015 COP decision that accompanied the Paris Agreement.[7] It specified that a "facilitative dialogue" would occur to take stock[8] of the collective efforts towards the long-term goal of the Paris Agreement. On the initiative of the Fiji COP23 Presidency, the "facilitative dialogue" was renamed the Talanoa Dialogue. Far beyond a simple rebranding, Fiji was responsible for expanding the dialogue to explicitly encourage participation of non-governmental actors (the original COP decision specified a dialogue "among Parties") as well as imbuing it with the spirit of Talanoa – a Pacific islands tradition of inclusive, constructive storytelling.

Launched at COP23 in November 2017, the Talanoa Dialogue was in fact a series of dialogues that ran for an entire year, culminating in a "political phase" at COP24 in December 2018. The Talanoa Dialogue was extremely popular, with a high level of participation: in total, governments and non-governmental actors hosted over 90 in-person Talanoa Dialogues across the globe, and there were 473 submissions to the online platform, where stakeholders were invited to provide inputs to the questions: Where are we? Where do we want to go? and How do we get there? Despite the clear enthusiasm around participation, the Talanoa Dialogue concluded with a sense of disappointment, at least with regards to the official outcome: the formal COP24 decision did not include any calls to increase ambition, and instead only "took note" of the Talanoa Dialogue outcomes. Furthermore, there was a sense that the capacity to process the multitude and variety of Talanoa inputs was very limited, leading to the feeling that they went nowhere (Beuermann et al. 2020). As an initiative of the Fiji COP Presidency, the Talanoa Dialogue process ended in 2018 and nothing similar in scope or intent has been initiated by subsequent COP presidencies or the UNFCCC Secretariat.

[5] See, e.g., Dialogues on Action for Climate Empowerment (https://unfccc.int/ace-dialogues), Gender Dialogue (https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/events-meetings/workshops-dialogues/gender-dialogue-constituted-bodies-and-the-integration-of-gender-considerations).

[6] See the Talanoa dialogue approach as described in Annex II to 1/CP.23, Informal note by the Presidencies of COP 22 and COP 23 (2017).

[7] Decision 1/CP.21

[8] The facilitative dialogue was a special designation for the forerunner to the "Global Stocktake," the "review" part of the pledge-and-review structure of the Paris Agreement.

A UNFCCC side event at COP25 (2019) in Madrid. © UNclimatechange on flickr

Reflection and dialogue for an improved communication culture

Recognizing the urgent need to mobilize climate action and implement the Paris Agreement, we see the need to reinvigorate the COPs through new formats of dialogue that can better foster collaboration and co-creation of climate change solutions. As one response to this, the IASS, together with partners from Chalmers University (Sweden), Lund University (Sweden) and the University of East Anglia (UK), designed and implemented an experimental Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space (CCRDS) at COP25. Located in a small (20 m²) meeting room, the CCRDS was designed to foster dialogue and offer an inspiring space for group discussions, in-depth sense-making, mutual reflection and learning, and co-creation, i.e., the process of collaboratively developing actionable ideas. The CCRDS was also part of a transdisciplinary research endeavor to investigate the communication culture of the COP and the need for addressing mindsets for activating climate action, as well as the factors that could enable this (Wamsler et al. 2020).

Based on the team's experiences with the CCRDS, we make three recommendations for fostering reflection, dialogue and collaboration among diverse actors at the COPs. Here we focus on dialogue and collaboration between party and non-party stakeholders as well as among non-party stakeholders; we do not address communication within the negotiations themselves, which have their own culture and rules of procedure. While we specifically address the COP conferences, the recommendations are applicable to the larger COP process, including "intersessional" and regional meetings.

Create an enabling environment.

Creating an enabling environment for a meeting space is about establishing the foundation for a reciprocal and trusting communication culture. Such a communication culture can support the processing of scientific information by engaging with people's inner dimensions, such as their beliefs, values, worldviews, emotions, and motivations. This is crucial in enabling transformative processes towards action and can be further supported by facilitation practices that support reflection, interconnection and action-orientation, as described below.

The environment of a meeting space sets an important tone for the quality and character of the conversations that can ensue. This includes both the physical surroundings and the more intangible atmosphere and collective mindset of those present, be it one of collegiality and openness or one of stress and tension. The sheer size and complexity of COP venues, typically large meeting halls with little natural light and lots of background noise, combined with an atmosphere that often feels hectic and stressed, makes for an environment that is often challenging for COP participants. Meeting hosts can take steps to create a setting, both material and immaterial, that is supportive of reflection and dialogue.

Beginning with the physical space, we recommend choosing setups that foster multidirectional communication; arranging chairs in a circle is one simple way to support this. This contrasts with arrangements such as stages and podiums, which create separation and competition between perspectives. Removing physical hierarchies helps cultivate a non-competitive atmosphere in which all participants can participate as experts in their own fields.

Adding elements of comfort to the meeting space – for instance, in the form of artwork, plants, or seat cushions – can contribute to a more intimate and relaxed setting. It can also help to stimulate creativity and help the mind detach after being stuck in intense discussions.

Moderators can also help create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable sharing meaningfully by establishing ground rules for communication at the beginning of the session. As an example, the guidelines below were developed for the CCRDS at COP25:

- Listen with compassion and curiosity.
- Suspend judgements, assumptions, and certainties.
- Keep personal stories confidential; do not share them beyond the room.
- Accept divergent opinions.
- Allow yourself to be both a professional and a human being.

These and similar principles can form the basis for a communicative environment that can allow participants to move beyond an exchange of fixed positions and instead engage in mutual learning and an exploration of new understandings. Depending on the format and goals of the session, it may be appropriate for the meeting host to explicitly state communication guidelines at the beginning of a session; it is also possible to highlight key communication principles on a poster displayed in the space.

Use facilitation practices that support reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation

Creating an enabling environment is a first step: it sets the tone and establishes favorable conditions for meaningful and productive discussion. To build on this, we recommend employing facilitation practices that support reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation. Here we provide a menu of options of what these could look like. It is not about prescribing an agenda, but rather about tools and practices that support the intentional design of a meeting. And while professional training in moderation or facilitation techniques is certainly advantageous and can increase effectiveness,[9] the practices we present can principally be employed by any meeting host.

Communication practices at settings like the COP are often propagated in an unreflected manner, simply because they have been dominant for many years. One example of this is addressing questions to a speaker directly after an input. This can create a dynamic where only a limited number of questions (representing a limited number of perspectives) are raised, and it remains unclear if and how these perspectives are relevant for the audience at large. It can also create a dynamic where only the loudest voices get heard, unintentionally contributing to an atmosphere of competition among the participants. This is particularly important to consider in situations like the COP where many different cultures come together: while speaking up for one's own perspective may be common practice in some cultures, in others the expectation may be that people only speak up when they are explicitly invited to, or when they feel that their response represents the majority.

Here, we propose principles of communication that we consider underrepresented in the currently dominant communication culture.

Reflection. Participants often lack the time and opportunity to process information being shared, and to reflect, either individually or collectively, on how it relates to their own perspectives. We recommend including reflection practices in the very same sessions where input is presented. Such reflection can encompass individual journaling (possibly also along with guiding reflection questions) or reflection exercises in small groups. Phases of silence or guided contemplative practices can also serve as reflective elements. The goal of all reflection practices is to invite participants to go beyond simply receiving information and become (or remain) aware of their own relationship to this information.

Interconnection. Quality relationships, built on trust and shared values and objectives, are key resources in transformation processes. Building new social identities and groups can support a shared belief in collective agency, which in turn can support collaboration and collective action. To foster interconnection, we recommend devoting meeting time for participants to get to know each other and explore each other's perspectives, capacities, and expertise. The purpose here is generally not to connect everyone with everyone. Rather, we recommend practices that enable a balance of feeling connected to the entire group on the one hand and building a limited number of quality connections on the other. This means that practices for gaining an overview of the people in the room should be complemented by opportunities for participants to have a few more in-depth encounters with other participants. This can be short conversations in groups of 2–3 people where people often feel more comfortable than presenting themselves in a full plenary situation.

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[9] In Fraude et al. 2021 the authors describe a set of competencies for facilitating transformative communication processes, which they summarize as "Mindset, Skillset, Toolset."

Action orientation. While the ultimate goal of the UNFCCC COPs is to spur action on climate change, the link between the vast amounts of information shared and the ability of specific actors to take action often remains vague or unaddressed. Since meaningful action often requires the formation of alliances that can bring together their capacities synergistically, practices to foster interconnection are also supportive of action orientation. To support action orientation at the COPs, we recommend designing meetings to include practices whereby participants reflect and exchange on their own capacities for taking action in their own contexts.

	Facilitation Practice	Effects
Opening	Start with something other than an input.	Avoids putting participants in a passive "receiving" mode, supporting action-orientation.
		Sets a non-hierarchical tone, supportive of interconnection.
	Open with a reflection, either individually or in small groups.	Offers participants the opportunity to actively clarify their understanding of the purpose of the meeting.
	Invite all participants to take notice and greet each other at the beginning of meeting.	Creates an atmosphere where all participants feel taken seriously and invited to "participate" rather than only receive. Supports action-orientation and contributes to an atmosphere of connection.
	Sociometric constellations (Howie 2010) as a kick-off for conversation, where physical space is used as a virtual map for selected questions or concepts (e.g., geography, constituency) and participants position themselves accordingly.	Can create connection within a group after getting a sense for one's own and others' positions. Can illuminate biases or missing perspectives and spark reflections on these issues.
Middle	Limit presentation time to no more than half (ideally one third) of the total meeting time.	Helps participants stay mentally present and reserves enough time for participants to engage and exchange.
	Include short conversations in small groups (3–4 people) from time to time.	Avoids participants "checking out" after listening for a while. Through the act of speaking, even if only in a small group and not in plenary, the minds of all participants stay engaged. "Silent voices" are actively encouraged and included to speak up. Participants can build connections among each other as a basis for further conversations after the session.
	After an input, allow time for conversation (e.g., with a "neighbor" or in small groups) before questions are directed to input-giver.	Fosters reflection as well as interconnection. Various perspectives on the input can be heard before the word is given to the speaker again. This avoids the first question dominating the conversation. Perspectives of all listeners are invited on an equal footing.
Closing	Close with a reflection by participants on how insights gained can be applied within their own contexts and fields of influence.	Fosters action-orientation by building in time and space to think about the next steps.
	Workshop-like sessions that support participants in creating ideas or activity sketches together. Formats from traditions like design thinking are one way to do this.	Fosters action-orientation and interconnection through teamwork.

Table 1:
Options for facilitation practices that support reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation. These principles and practices are complementary and mutually supportive. This list is not exhaustive; options represent different levels of specificity and require different amounts of time. All suggestions are meant to be adapted to the goals and constraints of individual meetings.

Develop networks for systemic change in the culture of collaboration at the COPs

We have outlined some ways in which the existing culture of communication at the COPs is not supportive of collaboration or of the activation of climate action and have made recommendations for how to facilitate more effective and action-oriented communication within the setting of individual meetings. However, affecting change in the culture of communication and collaboration of the COPs as a whole will require more than a collection of individual actors embracing new mindsets and practices in this regard.

Individual actors engaged in new forms of collaboration and dialogue should form networks and communities of practice to support each other as well as a greater transformation in the culture of collaboration at the COPs and within the wider climate community.

Such networks for dialogue and communication can serve multiple purposes. For the actors involved, they can provide a community of support that encourages experimentation and mutual learning. Such networks could work to develop shared visions and expectations for what they want to accomplish, and how. This would provide orientation to newcomers as well as for actors within the network, and in turn allow for a consistent, recognizable new collaboration culture to develop.

Another valuable role for networks working to advance new forms of dialogue would be to serve as a hub for learning within the broader COP community. They could offer advice, guidelines, and connections to trained facilitators as well as providing joint learning forums. In this way, such networks can also support expansion of the community itself, and potentially broader systemic change and the adoption of new norms and expectations (Naber et al. 2017). Not least, such networks can help to secure resources and gain visibility for their cause.

For many actors engaged in the climate community, the common focus is achieving climate "action," generally understood as mitigation, adaptation, and/or finance. Attention to the forms of communication and collaboration needed to achieve these goals is often either secondary or lacking. Therefore, one challenge for communities of practice promoting new forms of dialogue will be to successfully articulate and communicate why and how a changed communication culture can support collaboration and action, and thus deserves attention.

Indeed, an important role for networks working to advance innovative communication formats would be to jointly develop indicators to assess their impact. What outcomes do they aspire to and how can they be tracked? Importantly, this assessment should aim to facilitate mutual learning and benchmarking, espousing the values and logic of the networks themselves. As such, assessment criteria and procedures should be self-developed and acknowledge variety in how to shape new communication formats. The topic of how to track the contribution of cooperative initiatives is certainly an interest shared by the UNFCCC Secretariat, who has made a point of providing recognition for collaborative initiatives[10].

[10] E.g., via the UN Global Climate Action Awards.

Developing strong links to the key actors within UNFCCC process, such as the Constituencies and the Climate Action Network, will be advantageous in general. The UNFCCC Secretariat and COP presidencies could directly support initiatives by providing them space (e.g., within conference programs), resources, and opening up channels for communication. The topic of collaboration and communication could be integrated into the existing Capacity-building Hub, for example. Building on the example of the Talanoa Dialogue, it would be valuable for the UNFCCC Secretariat and future COP presidencies to invite and support collaborative dialogue on the whole-of-COP level.

Overall, establishing and growing networks engaged in new forms of dialogue and collaboration within the climate community is a path to building, from the bottom up, a strong alternative to the currently dominant communication culture. Systemic change could be significantly accelerated via recognition and support from those that have the most responsibility for the COP, particularly the UNFCCC Secretariat and COP Presidencies, by providing space, opportunities, and resources.

Final discussions before the participants arrive in the reflection and dialogue space © IASS

Conclusions & Outlook

Demand for increased participation in the UNFCCC COPs is high. However, ensuring observer access and a degree of transparency in the negotiations is still far from harnessing the collective will and expertise of those who gather regularly at the COPs. In this policy brief we argue that one key element for bridging this gap is fostering a new culture of communication in the COP setting. Communication that values reflection and dialogue may more effectively support increased innovation and collaboration for climate action.

In principle, nearly all – certainly the UNFCCC Secretariat and many diverse actors at the COPs – would support the idea that "dialogue" and "collaboration" are desirable. However, there is a need to raise the standards in the community for what these terms mean in practice. More attention needs to be directed towards choosing and further developing dialogue formats that enable participants to move beyond an exchange of fixed positions and reach deeper understandings of their situations and the problem at hand. In turn, this can allow them to move towards new solutions that address the root causes of these problems. Moreover, dialogues characterized by openness and curiosity are valuable for building new relationships based on trust and shared objectives, which can in turn form the basis for community-building and collective action.

With the adoption of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the near-completion of the corresponding "rulebook," the focus of the COPs is shifting from negotiation to implementation. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has delivered an external shock and challenge to the UNFCCC process, with COP26 postponed an entire year. These disruptions may offer an opportunity to re-envision and reshape the modes of communication at the COP beyond business as usual. Moving forward, it will also be increasingly important to consider how the principles described here can be implemented in digital spaces. Developing digital formats that foster trust, reflection, and interconnection will require openness and experimentation and will certainly present challenges. Nonetheless, inclusive digital communication formats will become a necessity – among other things, for reducing the COP's significant travel-related carbon footprint.

Fundamentally, the recommendations here represent a re-envisioned understanding of what the COP as a meeting can achieve: moving away from a focus on knowledge exchange and awareness-raising towards collectively shaping a culture of reciprocal and trusting relationships and communication, which can in turn support collective, cooperative action in addressing the climate crisis. ▍

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