









PERSPECTIVE

Learning and community building in support of collective action: Toward a new climate of communication at the COP

Kathleen A. Mar¹  | Niko Schöpke^{1,2}  | Carolin Fraude¹  |
 Thomas Bruhn¹  | Christine Wamsler³  | Dorota Stasiak¹  |
 Heike Schroeder⁴  | Mark G. Lawrence^{1,5} 

¹Research Institute for Sustainability—Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS), Potsdam, Germany

²Institute of Environmental Social Sciences and Geography, University of Freiburg, Freiburg, Germany

³Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS), Lund University, Lund, Sweden

⁴School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

⁵Institute of Environmental Science and Geography, University of Potsdam, Potsdam, Germany

Correspondence

Kathleen A. Mar, Research Institute for Sustainability—Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS), Berliner Str. 130, 14467 Potsdam, Germany.

Email: kathleen.mar@rifs-potsdam.de

Funding information

Chalmers Energy Area of Advance; Federal Ministry of Education and Research of Germany (BMBF); Ministry for Science, Research and Culture of the State of Brandenburg (MWFK); Svenska Forskningsrådet Formas, Grant/Award Numbers: 2019-00390, 2019-01969

Edited by: James Patterson, Domain Editor, and Mike Hulme, Editor-in-Chief

Abstract

The international UN Climate Change conferences known as “Conferences of the Parties (COPs)” have an enormous convening power and are attended annually by tens of thousands of actors working on climate change topics from a wide range of perspectives. In the COP spaces outside of the formal negotiations, the communication culture is dominated by “side events,” a format that relies heavily on conventional presentations and panels that can be informative, but is generally not conducive to mutual engagement, reflection, or dialogue. There is an urgent need for new dialogue formats that can better foster learning and community-building and thereby harness the enormous latent potential for climate action represented by the diverse stakeholders that gather at the COP. Against this backdrop, and drawing on our experience with the development and implementation of the Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Spaces at COP25, COP26, and COP27, we make recommendations for further developing the communication culture of the COPs. At the level of individual sessions, we provide recommendations for designing participatory dialogues that can better support reflection, interconnection, and action orientation. In addition, we offer guidance for scaling up these practices, for instance through networks and communities of practice to support a shift of the overall communication culture of the COPs. Our recommendations focus on interactions and exchanges that unfold outside of the formal negotiation sessions, with a view toward enabling and accelerating transformative action by non-state actors.

This article is categorized under:

Perceptions, Behavior, and Communication of Climate Change > Communication Policy and Governance > International Policy Framework

KEYWORDS

communication, COP, dialogue, non-state actors, UNFCCC

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Authors. *WIREs Climate Change* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Held under the authority of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the annual UN Climate Change conferences known as “COPs” (for Conferences of the Parties)¹ are the primary international venue for countries to negotiate how they will act and cooperate to avoid dangerous climate change. Beyond the negotiators themselves, the conferences draw actors from across society, including the scientific community, civil society organizations, the private sector, local government, indigenous communities, and the media, all of whom have the formal status of “observer.” The conference attracts tens of thousands of attendees in total, up to half of whom are typically observers. These “non-party stakeholders” attend COP with a multitude of purposes, including influencing the negotiations and the political agenda, raising awareness on their topics of focus, and generally advancing climate action (Kuyper et al., 2018; Lövbrand et al., 2017; Schroeder & Lovell, 2012). Although it is recognized that participants from the Global South and from indigenous communities are underrepresented (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Belfer et al., 2019; Marion Suisseea & Zanotti, 2019), the COP has an unmatched convening power, annually assembling a unique constellation of diverse stakeholders from around the globe.

The UNFCCC emphasizes the need to involve non-state actors in recognition of their critical role in implementing measures to address climate change. In that sense, the composition and large number of COP “observer” attendees embodies to some extent the non-state actor participation desired by the UNFCCC (Schroeder & Lovell, 2012). Yet how exactly their participation will contribute to “mobiliz[ing] stronger and more ambitious climate action” as foreseen under the Paris Agreement² is unclear—either within or beyond the COP itself (Chan et al., 2019; Hale et al., 2021; Kuyper et al., 2018). Bäckstrand et al. (2021) point out that while broad inclusion of diverse actors has the potential to increase legitimacy and generate support for climate policies, there can also be significant trade-offs and tensions between inclusion and effective outcomes. The non-state actors that come to the COPs bring with them a multitude of sometimes conflicting policy objectives and knowledge claims that can be difficult to bridge (Lövbrand et al., 2017; Wamsler et al., 2020).

In this perspective, we cast our gaze on the COP as an event and meeting space, and first consider what attendees are doing there in the most literal sense. We restrict our view to the spaces outside the formal negotiation halls.³ Here participants of all types congregate, meet with colleagues, and have informal conversations during chance encounters in the corridors or while waiting in line for coffee. In addition to these informal meetings, a great deal of time is spent either presenting one's own work or listening to presentations in so-called “side events,” the dominant formalized arrangement for information exchange in the COP setting.

Side events⁴ typically last 1.5 h and feature a panel composed of high-level speakers from delegations and/or observer organizations. They generally entail presentations, discussion among panelists, and then limited time for Q&A or comments from the audience (Mar et al., 2021; Schroeder & Lovell, 2012). Over the entire 2 weeks of the COP, numerous side event programs run in parallel, competing for the attention of attendees. The result is a swirl of activity and an overall atmosphere that has been compared with a trade fair (e.g., Lövbrand et al., 2017), a “circus” (Freyne, 2021), “theatre” (Death, 2011), “summitry,” and a global “mega event” (Lövbrand et al., 2017). In our own experience, the dominance of the side event format within the often-frenzied atmosphere at the COP can be overwhelming and participants have little physical or mental space to process the large number of inputs (Mar et al., 2021).

This brings us to the crux of our line of inquiry and argumentation. The COP brings together diverse actors who embody a huge collective potential in terms of combined expertise, experience and skills. And yet the dominant formal format for interaction between these actors remains the conventional, panel-based side event, which implicitly espouses the outdated “information deficit” model of communication wherein the listening public are “‘empty vessels’ waiting to be filled with useful information” (Ockwell et al., 2009, p. 321) who have little opportunity to engage with what they hear. While the typical side event can be useful for conveying information, we argue that more interactive communication formats are called for—ones that are more conducive to engaging participants on a cognitive as well as experiential level—if the COP as a mega-event is to play a role in enabling and accelerating transformative action, especially by non-state actors.

The need for more engaging communication formats within the COP setting has also been identified by other actors. In our observation, formats diverging from the typical side event panel have increased over the past several COPs. For instance, the Capacity-building Hub at COP27 offered an “Open Space Learning Day” as well as formats including participatory theater and storytelling.⁵ Elsewhere around COP27 we observed circle dialogues at the Singapore Pavilion and “Futures lab” and “World café” offerings at the Children and Youth Pavilion. On the margins of COP27, the Interfaith Liaison Committee hosted its annual “Interfaith Gathering in the Spirit of Talanoa.”⁶

Nonetheless, the dominance of the side event panel persists at COP, with interactive communication formats remaining the exception.

2 | TOWARD DEVELOPING A NEW COMMUNICATION CULTURE AT THE COP

Identifying a need for more participatory and engaging communication spaces within the COP setting, at COP25, COP26, and COP27 the authors offered a “Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space” (CCRDS), which was designed as a space to experiment with communication formats in the context of the COP. Located in a small meeting room in the Blue Zone (see endnote 3) at each COP, the intention of the CCRDS was to foster processes of reflection, dialogue, comprehensive sense-making, and co-creation, that is, the collaborative development of actionable ideas (Mar et al., 2021). The CCRDS was also part of a transdisciplinary research inquiry investigating the communication culture of the COP (Fraude et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2020).

The CCRDS was the starting point for developing recommendations for improved communication practices within the COP setting, which we present here. Insights into the communication culture of the COP were generated in the research process (which included expert interviews, participant surveys, and participatory observations in a triangulative approach) as well as via direct feedback on CCRDS formats (see Fraude et al., 2021; Mar et al., 2021; Wamsler et al., 2020). To develop the recommendations presented here, we drew on these insights as well as a diverse body of literature spanning a wide range of disciplines, all of which informed a collective reflection process regarding our experiences in designing, implementing, and researching the CCRDS.

We begin with recommendations for designing and hosting dialogues at the “micro” level of individual sessions. We then consider what it would take to scale up these changes and affect change in the communication culture of the COP as a whole. Our recommendations focus on the COP as an event. We do not address the formal negotiation process, which has its own culture and rules of procedure, and instead focus on the non-negotiation spaces at the COP. These are spaces for interaction among all COP participants, including negotiators and the diversity of societal actors accredited as observers. Here the UNFCCC Secretariat has a central role in supporting interactions by providing spaces for meetings and side events. While we see the potential for non-state actors to increasingly take on a leading role within these non-negotiation spaces, our recommendations could be taken up by any actors within the COP, including the UNFCCC Secretariat, the COP Presidencies, and Party actors.

The recommendations we provide here are designed to facilitate exchange and mutual learning and to lay the groundwork for action or decisions. They are *not* designed to enable groups to make decisions together, which is a clear limitation. Transcending differing interests and power imbalances among participants would be significantly more challenging in a decision-making setting.

2.1 | Design participatory dialogues that foster reflection, interconnection, and action orientation

At the micro level of individual dialogues, our recommendations are intended to create an environment and a structure for interaction that can enable learning and trust building. The goal behind our recommendations is to design a dialogue with the potential to facilitate more than the exchange of established positions, in which participants can reach deeper understandings of their individual and/or collective circumstances and relevant challenges. While we focus on the COP, these recommendations could be relevant for many other settings where similar communication cultures dominate.

2.1.1 | Create a participatory environment

The first thing to consider is how to create an environment conducive to participatory dialogue. This means holding the space in a way that makes people comfortable enough to share perspectives, experiences, and opposing views, and also to consider their beliefs and values (c.f., “safe enough” spaces in Pereira et al., 2020). Designing a participatory dialogue

means deliberately seeking out a variety of perspectives beyond those that usually dominate, consistent with the concept of transformative spaces in Pereira et al. (2020). This is in contrast to the prevailing communication culture of the COP, which CCRDS participants described as “power laden,” “top down,” “male-dominated,” and “exclusive” (Wamsler et al., 2020).

To create an enabling environment for participatory dialogue, it is also important to be cognizant of power relationships and dynamics, and to develop an approach for recognizing and dealing with these issues where possible (Molinengo, 2022; Turnhout et al., 2020). Considering the physical space, we recommend a set-up that fosters multidirectional communication; one simple way to achieve this is by arranging chairs in a circle. More conventional set-ups that make use of stages and podiums create a physical separation between participants that reinforce hierarchies and hampers engagement. Removing physical barriers can help to create an atmosphere that is less competitive and in which all participants can contribute as experts of equal standing (Molinengo & Stasiak, 2020).

Another way to help create an enabling environment for participatory dialogue is to establish communicative ground rules at the beginning of the session. This sets the tone and expectations for the ensuing interactions. For example, the following guidelines were developed for the CCRDS:

- Listen with compassion and curiosity.
- Become aware of and suspend judgments, 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 (Mar et al., 2021).

It is important to add that facilitators of the sessions should be role models with respect to practicing these communication principles.

2.1.2 | Choose facilitation practices that foster reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation

Beyond creating an environment where participants are emboldened to speak and share, we identified three communication principles which, in our view, are underrepresented in the current communication culture of the COP (Mar et al., 2021) and provide examples of facilitation practices that can be used to support these values (Table 1; Figure 1; Box 1).

1. **Reflection.** Practices of reflection invite participants to go beyond receiving information and to instead consider their own relationship to it (Mar et al., 2021). Like Rietig and Perkins (2018), we view reflection as a prerequisite for learning. Learning can happen when “individuals and/or organizations reflect on an input such as new information or an experience by carefully thinking about how this input matches with their pre-existing beliefs, for example, their world view and understanding of an issue” (Rietig, 2019, p. 229). Reflective elements in a meeting can invite people to engage with their beliefs, emotions, values, and intrinsic motivations, which can support transformation (Wamsler et al., 2020; Wamsler et al., 2021; Woiwode et al., 2021). Reflection is closely related to the concept of reflexivity, which involves examining assumptions and positions that are usually taken for granted, thereby helping to “make explicit the implicit values, frames and assumptions of individuals/collectives” (Fazey et al., 2018, p. 57).
2. **Interconnection.** It is well recognized that climate change is, among other things, a collective action problem, for which responses should be oriented toward the common good. Interconnection as a communication principle is intended to support building relationships, empathy, and trust, as well as a sense of shared responsibility. Building (new) communities can create a sense of collective agency, which can ultimately lead to collaboration and collective action (Jugert et al., 2016; Mar et al., 2021). Indeed, it is understood that “deep collaboration” (Keohane & Victor, 2016; Marion Suiseeya et al., 2021) is necessary for effective climate action, and that this needs to be underpinned by strong relationships and trust (Marion Suiseeya et al., 2021). Furthermore, connection, encompassing qualities including compassion, empathy, solidarity, and respect, has been identified as one inner “transformative capacity” that can facilitate a paradigm shift in support of sustainable transformations (Wamsler et al., 2021). In its most simple incarnation, fostering interconnection within dialogue sessions involves allocating time for participants to become acquainted and gain insights into one another’s perspectives, capacities, and expertise.
3. **Action orientation.** Limiting dangerous climate change requires individual and collective action at all levels of society. Action orientation within a dialogue session means taking steps to link the information and experiences shared with

TABLE 1 Facilitation practices that foster reflection, interconnection, and action orientation, adapted with permission from Mar et al. (2021).

Facilitation practice	Effects
<i>Opening</i>	
Start with something other than an input.	Avoids putting participants in a passive “receiving” mode. Sets a non-hierarchical tone.
Open with an invitation to reflect, either individually or in small groups.	Offers participants the opportunity to clarify their understanding of the purpose of the meeting.
Invite all participants to take notice of and greet each other at beginning of meeting.	Creates atmosphere where all participants feel taken seriously and called to participate rather than only absorb information passively.
Use sociometric constellations (Howie, 2010), where the physical space of the room becomes a virtual map on which participants position themselves in relation to selected questions or concepts (e.g., geography, constituency).	Can create connection within a group by allowing people to get a sense of their own and others' positions. Can illuminate biases or missing perspectives and spark reflections on these issues.
<i>Middle</i>	
Limit presentation time to no more than half (ideally one-third) of the total meeting time.	Helps participants stay mentally present and leaves enough time for them to engage with each other and exchange ideas.
Include short breakout discussions (3–4 people) from time to time, e.g., for self-reflection and perspective-taking.	Helps keep participants engaged via speaking and interacting with others. Encourages participation of those who may be more reticent in a larger group. Allows participants forge connections with each other as basis for further conversations after the session.
Allow time for conversation after an input, (e.g., with a “neighbor” or in small groups) before questions are directed to the input-giver.	Perspectives from all listeners are invited on an equal footing. Creates a space for various perspectives on the input to be shared before the first question is put to the speaker. This makes it less likely that the first question dominates the conversation.
Engage in workshop-like sessions that support participants in generating ideas or activity sketches together.	Connects participants through teamwork and encourages them to think about the actions they can take.
<i>Closing</i>	
Close with a reflection by participants on how the insights gained can be applied in their own specific contexts and fields of influence.	Sets aside time and space to think about concrete steps to be taken by concrete actors.

Note: This table is intended as a “menu” of tools and practices that meeting hosts can pick and choose from depending on the overall purpose of the meeting. This list is not exhaustive; suggested practices are intended to be adapted to the needs of individual meetings.

the ability of specific actors to act on this input in their own contexts. The principle of action orientation is less about spreading technocratic solutions to climate change, and more about enabling individual and social learning on the question of how to enact change (Caniglia et al., 2021; Fazey et al., 2018). Interconnection can also support action orientation by facilitating joint intentions and shared agency. One way to foster action orientation within a session is to provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on how new insights can be applied within their own arenas and spheres of influence (Mar et al., 2021). Practices that cultivate a sense of purpose and agency among participants can also support action orientation (Wamsler et al., 2020; Wamsler et al., 2021).

2.1.3 | Form networks and communities of practice to change the communication culture at the COP

At the macro level of the COP as a mega-event, we envision a communication culture that moves away from a mode of information transmission and awareness-raising and instead emphasizes learning and community-building. Other

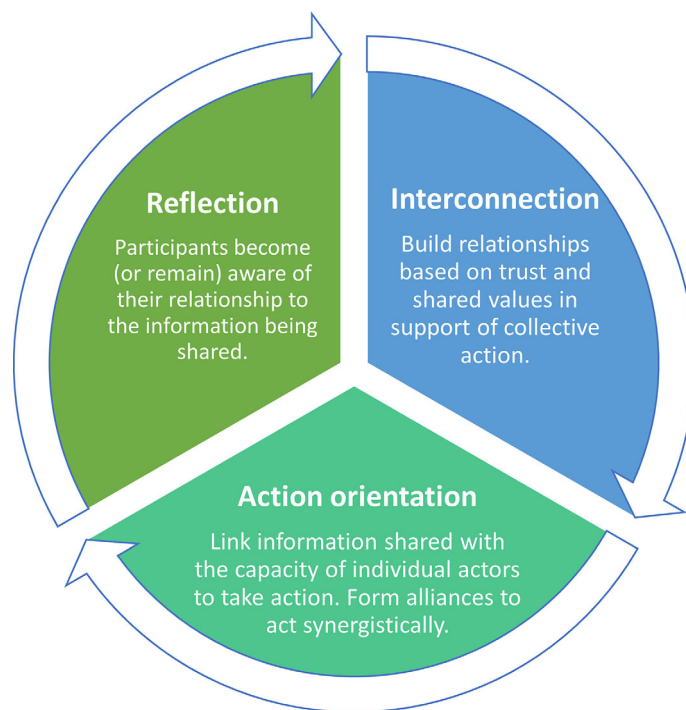


FIGURE 1 Communication principles for dialogues that foster learning and community-building in service of climate action.

BOX 1 What's wrong with Q&A?

In “Question & Answer” sessions—which are by nature always time-limited—it is often only the loudest voices that get heard. Only a limited number of questions or comments can be addressed, and their relevance for the audience at large is not always evident. Moreover, Q&A sessions are often marked by a degree of competition among participants. This dynamic is particularly important to keep in mind in at the COP, where many different cultures come together: while taking every opportunity to share one's views may be typical in some cultures, in others the norm may be that people only speak up when they are explicitly invited to, or when they feel that their position is aligned with that of the majority (Mar et al., 2021).

To mitigate this dynamic, rather than fielding questions directly after a presentation or other input, we suggest first allowing time for small group or “neighbor” conversations (see Table 1). This invites all listeners to share their perspectives on an equal footing before the first question is posed to the speaker in plenary. In addition to setting an egalitarian tone, this “pre-discussion” increases the likelihood that a more representative set of concerns will come to the fore in a Q&A session.

scholars have also called for strengthening the COPs' function as a learning platform (Obergassel et al., 2022). In our view, such a shift in the communication culture of the COP would involve at least a partial reframing of the purpose of attending as an observer. While learning and community building are not necessarily incompatible with goals like influencing the negotiations, showcasing one's work, and networking (cf., Hanegraaff, 2015; Lövbrand et al., 2017), they represent a different focus and embody stronger cooperative intent. One vision for this is articulated in Wamsler et al. (2020, p. 233):

A mindset shift might thus involve a different framing regarding the COP, notably its aims, potential contributions, actors, and setting, moving from the traditional view (COP as a negotiation platform based on international climate diplomacy) [...] to a complete overhaul that sees COP as an inclusive innovation and learning platform (or network of platforms). The latter would include multilateral governance, but involve more innovative elements such as prototyping, action alliances, experimental learning labs, and [Reflection & Dialogue] spaces.

It is clear that changing the overall communication culture of the COP mega-event will require more than the adoption of new dialogue formats by individual hosts within the COP setting. As one path toward affecting systemic change, we recommend that actors engaged in developing dialogue formats forge networks and communities of practice, which can offer support and promote broader change in the COP setting.

Indeed, such networks and communities of practice could serve several purposes. They could provide a supportive community for the actors involved and encourage experimentation and mutual learning (Mar et al., 2021). As emphasized by Molinengo et al. (2021, p. 7), the process expertise necessary for designing collaborative processes is “cultivated, fostered, and implemented not only at the individual level but also [...] as a collective practice”; communities of practice could play a key role here. Networks could seek to develop shared visions, objectives, and approaches. Another important undertaking would be to jointly develop indicators to assess the impact and success of new dialogue formats in way that facilitates mutual learning, thereby espousing the values of the networks themselves (Schot & Geels, 2008; Smith & Raven, 2012).

Networks working to advance communication practices could also serve as learning hubs within the COP community, for instance by offering advice, guidelines, and connections to trained facilitators. In this outward-facing role, these networks could support the growth of the community as well as broader systemic change, which could occur via the adoption of new norms and expectations (Smith & Raven, 2012). Crucially, these networks could help to obtain resources and improve the visibility of participatory dialogue formats within the COP space.

As expressed in Mar et al. (2021, p. 11), “establishing and expanding networks and communities of practice 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” at the COPs. In principle, these activities could be taken on and driven by any actor—or, more realistically, alliance(s) of actors—within the COP space. Certainly, it is an undertaking that would require interest, commitment, and resources. Of course, recognition and support from those in positions of authority, particularly the COP presidencies and the UNFCCC Secretariat, could accelerate this transformation process. Nonetheless, we have purposely recommended forming networks and communities of practice as a pathway toward change that does not rely on “top down” action or endorsement by the UNFCCC, in the spirit of empowering the actors involved and with the expectation that (some) non-state actors will be able to be more agile in embracing new ways of working.

3 | WHAT CAN THIS ACHIEVE?

The COP draws significant criticism for being nothing more than “blah, blah, blah”—as Greta Thunberg put it (Carrington, 2021)—in the sense of being all talk and no action. From this perspective our focus on the communication practices and culture at the COP is bound to be received with some skepticism. But the COP itself is a meeting where “talk” is by definition the primary activity; almost all of the “action” needs to take place outside of the conference itself. We agree that the COP itself has value as a meeting⁷ that brings together “diverse actor networks, normally dispersed in time and space, to perform global climate governance” (Löfbrand et al., 2017, p. 590). The recommendations presented here grew out of considerations regarding how redesigned communication formats could make better use of the collective capacities of the diverse participants that gather at the COPs. The question then becomes—can reimagined communication formats within the context of the COP mega-event contribute to increased (collective) action that is carried forward and implemented after the close of the meeting? This, of course, is an open question—though we argue that the chances for spurring action are greater if we can re-orient communication at the COP toward learning and community building rather than perpetuating the current “side event” culture.

We see re-designing communication formats to support participation, reflection, interconnection, and action-orientation as one means to enabling increased learning and community building within the COP setting, to ultimately support transformations toward sustainability. Nonetheless, such a shift in the communication culture at the COP—even if it were to be achieved on a large scale—is not a climate solution in and of itself. It could, however, be an important contributing factor to support action and shift the cultures and paradigms that underlie current unsustainable structures and systems. Vogel and O’Brien (2022), for instance, highlight the need for spaces of wholeness that hold innate universal values—including equity, dignity, and compassion—as sources of radical transformation.

In combination with a transformed communication culture, action could be bolstered significantly by embedding dialogues and workshops within larger, problem-specific, solution-oriented processes that span the 2-week period of

the COP, and ideally beyond. As Pereira et al. (2020, pp. 173-174) put it, “creating transformative spaces is not about a single event or workshop. Rather it is a continued process of engagement through designed and facilitated interactions that often involve a series of workshops or programs that requires planning, organization and curation.” In this regard it is a challenge for community-building as well as action orientation that conventional side events and CCRDS dialogue sessions alike are almost exclusively “one-off” events, in the sense that there is no stable group of participants taking part in multiple sessions that build upon one another. Implementing larger, transformation-oriented processes within the COP setting (outside the formal negotiations) would thus involve a commitment not only on the part of the organizers, but also among the participants.

Under the UNFCCC there are several work streams with an explicit mandate to engage with and empower non-party stakeholders. In principle, these could provide frameworks in which larger dialogue processes could be implemented, or to which independently-organized initiatives could link. Examples include Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE),⁸ with a focus on public education and outreach, and the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action,⁹ which facilitates collaborations with stakeholders including cities and businesses. The Global Stocktake¹⁰ is another example of a process that includes inputs from non-party stakeholders and moreover has been progressive in choosing interactive formats for its activities, including the World Cafés as part of the Global Stocktake's first Technical Dialogue and the Talanoa Dialogue process that was the Global Stocktake's forerunner (see endnote 6). Actors interested in designing participatory dialogue formats at the COP could reach out to these initiatives and seek collaboration.

The path to achieving a transformation in the communication culture of the COP is likely to be neither simple nor direct, but individuals and organizations who want to take steps in this direction have many places to look for inspiration—for instance, the proliferation of sustainability-oriented real-world laboratories (Bergmann et al., 2021; McCrory et al., 2022) and transformative spaces (Pereira et al., 2020). Principles of co-production of actionable knowledge and transdisciplinary collaboration can provide orientation, including on approaching issues of power and politization (Caniglia et al., 2021; Lang et al., 2012; Lawrence et al., 2022; Norström et al., 2020; Turnhout et al., 2020). Theoretical advances in understanding inner-outer transformation processes also provide new guidance on the role of transformative spaces and how they should be complemented with other types of interventions to support sustainable change (Wamsler et al., 2021).

As a well-established “wicked problem,” climate change is a complex environmental and social challenge that will require not one, but many responses (Lawrence et al., 2022). Here we have proposed one approach, taking a relational view by focusing on the ways in which actors at the COP engage and relate to one another with a view to improving self-reflection, communication, and collaboration. Our recommendations represent a re-imagined vision of what could be achieved with and through the COP, particularly for the large number of non-state actors that assemble there. We propose that consciously and critically rethinking, revamping, and redirecting our communication practices toward learning and community building can help collectively shape a new communication culture, as one important element for supporting collective, cooperative action to address the climate crisis.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Niko Schöpke: Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Carolin Fraude:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Thomas Bruhn:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Christine Wamsler:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Dorota Stasiak:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Heike Schroeder:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Mark G. Lawrence:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Kathleen A. Mar:** Conceptualization (equal); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (lead).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Sander Chan, Martin Frick, and Gregg Walker for productive conversations. We also thank Adina Spertus-Melhus for research support and Anne Boden and Damian Harrison for editing help. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Prior to January 1, 2023, the Research Institute for Sustainability — Helmholtz Centre Potsdam (RIFS) was the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e.V. (IASS). It received funding from the Federal Ministry of Education and

Research of Germany (BMBF) and the Ministry for Science, Research and Culture of the State of Brandenburg (MWFK). Niko Schöpke acknowledges funding from the Chalmers Energy Area of Advance. The contribution of Christine Wamsler was supported by two projects funded by the Swedish Research Council Formas: (i) Mind4Change (grant number 2019-00390; full title: Agents of Change: Mind, Cognitive Bias and Decision-Making in a Context of Social and Climate Change), and (ii) TransVision (grant number 2019-01969; full title: Transition Visions: Coupling Society, Well-being and Energy Systems for Transitioning to a Fossil-free Society).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Heike Schroeder is an Associate Editor of the journal and was excluded from the peer-review process and all editorial decisions related to the publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Kathleen A. Mar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6427-6618>

Niko Schöpke  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2232-1430>

Carolin Fraude  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4529-8907>

Thomas Bruhn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5940-462X>

Christine Wamsler  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4511-1532>

Dorota Stasiak  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4690-8658>

Heike Schroeder  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2342-2030>

Mark G. Lawrence  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2178-4903>

RELATED WIREs ARTICLES

[Promises and risks of nonstate action in climate and sustainability governance](#)

[On the political feasibility of climate change mitigation pathways: Is it too late to keep warming below 1.5°C?](#)

[Non-state actors in hybrid global climate governance: justice, legitimacy, and effectiveness in a post-Paris era](#)

[Climate change and social transformations: is it time for a quantum leap?](#)

[From regime-building to implementation: Harnessing the UN climate conferences to drive climate action](#)

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although the term “COP” is often used as a shorthand for the UN Climate Change Conferences, in legal terms the Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC and the annual UN Climate Conferences are the sessions of the COP (see Article 7 of the UNFCCC).
- ² In Decision 1/CP.21 that accompanied the adoption of the Paris Agreement, non-party stakeholders are mentioned repeatedly. Among other things, Parties agree to promote cooperation in order to “mobilize stronger and more ambitious climate action by all Parties and non-party stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, financial institutions, cities and other subnational authorities, local communities and indigenous peoples.”
- ³ Our focus is on the “Blue Zone,” which refers to the space at the UN Climate Change Conferences that can only be accessed by accredited attendees (members of Parties, observer organizations, and media). This includes spaces for side events. Negotiation rooms are also located within the Blue Zone, although they are sometimes closed to those with “observer” badges. The COP sessions also regularly include a separate space for civil society events referred to as the “Green Zone,” which is open to the general public.
- ⁴ Side events were originally established by the UNFCCC for observer organizations to highlight topics relevant to climate change in a forum outside of the formal negotiation process. UNFCCC side events take place in dedicated meeting rooms provided by UNFCCC; there is a competitive application process open to Parties and accredited observer organizations to receive a slot. For reference, 280 UNFCCC side events took place over 11 days at COP25. The term “side events” has expanded to refer to the many similar events that take place at pavilions. These can be hosted by countries or non-state actors.

- ⁵ The Capacity-building Hub is an activity of the Paris Committee on Capacity-building (PCCB), which was established at COP21 (Decision 1/CP.21, para 71). As such, it is part of the formal architecture of the Paris Agreement. The program for the COP27 Capacity-building hub can be found at <https://unfccc.int/pccb/4CBHub>.
- ⁶ The Interfaith community's "Talanoa" dialogues are inspired by the "original" Talanoa Dialogue, launched by the Fiji COP presidency at COP23. It was the format chosen for (and the name given to) the first global stocktake of collective efforts toward achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement. Talanoa Dialogue sessions included participation of both Party and non-party stakeholders and were typically circle dialogues framed as forums to share stories and build empathy and trust. The Talanoa Dialogue was very popular and drew large numbers of participants, but the process ended in 2018 with a sense of disappointment that the formal COP24 decision did not include its outcomes in any meaningful way.
- ⁷ While we see face-to-face meetings as critical for building relationships and trust, we also recognize the need to balance this with reducing the meeting's considerable carbon footprint, including via virtual or hybrid meetings. We identify a need for experimentation with and development of digital formats that can foster trust, reflection, and interconnection.
- ⁸ Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) denotes work under Article 6 of the UNFCCC and Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, with the over-arching goal of empowering all members of society to engage in climate action. Activities include climate change education and public participation.
- ⁹ The Marrakech Partnership is coordinated by the High-Level Climate Champions, who are appointed by the COP presidents. However the activities themselves have no direct formal link to the negotiations.
- ¹⁰ The Global Stocktake is the mechanism for taking stock of collective progress towards reaching the goals of the Paris Agreement, as specified in Article 14 therein. The first global stocktake was known as the Talanoa Dialogue. Per Decision 19/CMA.1, the global stocktake is a "Party-driven process conducted ... with the participation of non-Party stakeholders."

REFERENCES

- Bäckstrand, K., Kuyper, J., & Nasiritousi, N. (2021). From collaboration to contestation? Perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness in post-Paris climate governance. *Earth System Governance*, 9, 100115. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esg.2021.100115>
- Bäckstrand, K., Kuyper, J. W., Linnér, B.-O., & Lövbrand, E. (2017). Non-state actors in global climate governance: From Copenhagen to Paris and beyond. *Environmental Politics*, 26(4), 561–579. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2017.1327485>
- Belfer, E., Ford, J. D., Maillet, M., Araos, M., & Flynn, M. (2019). Pursuing an indigenous platform: Exploring opportunities and constraints for indigenous participation in the UNFCCC. *Global Environmental Politics*, 19(1), 12–33. https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00489
- Bergmann, M., Schöpke, N., Marg, O., Stelzer, F., Lang, D. J., Bossert, M., Gantert, M., Häußler, E., Marquardt, E., Piontek, F. M., Potthast, T., Rhodius, R., Rudolph, M., Ruddat, M., Seebacher, A., & Sußmann, N. (2021). Transdisciplinary sustainability research in real-world labs: Success factors and methods for change. *Sustainability Science*, 16(2), 541–564. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00886-8>
- Caniglia, G., Luederitz, C., von Wirth, T., Fazey, I., Martín-López, B., Hondrila, K., König, A., von Wehrden, H., Schöpke, N. A., Laubichler, M. D., & Lang, D. J. (2021). A pluralistic and integrated approach to action-oriented knowledge for sustainability. *Nature Sustainability*, 4(2), 93–100. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-020-00616-z>
- Carrington, D. (2021). 'Blah, blah, blah': Greta Thunberg lambasts leaders over climate crisis. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/28/blah-greta-thunberg-leaders-climate-crisis-co2-emissions>
- Chan, S., Boran, I., van Asselt, H., Iacobuta, G., Niles, N., Rietig, K., Scobie, M., Bansard, J. S., Delgado Pugley, D., Delina, L. L., Eichhorn, F., Ellinger, P., Enechi, O., Hale, T., Hermwille, L., Hickmann, T., Honegger, M., Hurtado Epstein, A., La Hoz Theuer, S., ... Wambugu, G. (2019). Promises and risks of nonstate action in climate and sustainability governance. *WIREs Climate Change*, 10(3), e572. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.572>
- Death, C. (2011). Summit theatre: Exemplary governmentality and environmental diplomacy in Johannesburg and Copenhagen. *Environmental Politics*, 20(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2011.538161>
- Fazey, I., Schöpke, N., Caniglia, G., Patterson, J., Hultman, J., van Mierlo, B., Säwe, F., Wiek, A., Wittmayer, J., Aldunce, P., Al Waer, H., Battacharya, N., Bradbury, H., Carmen, E., Colvin, J., Cvitanovic, C., D'Souza, M., Gopel, M., Goldstein, B., ... Wyborn, C. (2018). Ten essentials for action-oriented and second order energy transitions, transformations and climate change research. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 40, 54–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.11.026>
- Fraude, C., Bruhn, T., Stasiak, D., Wamsler, C., Mar, K. A., Schöpke, N., Schroeder, H., & Lawrence, M. G. (2021). Creating space for reflection and dialogue: Examples of new modes of communication for empowering climate action. *GAIA - Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society*, 30(3), 174–180.
- Freyne, P. (2021). Welcome to Cop26—'it's a bit like a circus' but with a 'corporate feeling'. *The Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/welcome-to-cop26-it-s-a-bit-like-a-circus-but-with-a-corporate-feeling-1.4717545>

- Hale, T. N., Chan, S., Hsu, A., Clapper, A., Elliott, C., Faria, P., Kuramochi, T., McDaniel, S., Morgado, M., Roelfsema, M., Santaella, M., Singh, N., Tout, I., Weber, C., Weinfurter, A., & Widerberg, O. (2021). Sub- and non-state climate action: A framework to assess progress, implementation and impact. *Climate Policy*, 21(3), 406–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1828796>
- Hanegraaff, M. (2015). Interest groups at transnational negotiation conferences: Goals, strategies, interactions, and influence. *Global Governance*, 21(4), 599–620. <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02104007>
- Howie, P. (2010). Using sociodrama and sociometry to create group environments. *Group Psychologist*, 20(2), 11–14.
- Jugert, P., Greenaway, K. H., Barth, M., Büchner, R., Eisentraut, S., & Fritsche, I. (2016). Collective efficacy increases pro-environmental intentions through increasing self-efficacy. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 48, 12–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2016.08.003>
- Keohane, R. O., & Victor, D. G. (2016). Cooperation and discord in global climate policy. *Nature Climate Change*, 6(6), 570–575. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nclimate2937>
- Kuyper, J. W., Linnér, B.-O., & Schroeder, H. (2018). Non-state actors in hybrid global climate governance: Justice, legitimacy, and effectiveness in a post-Paris era. *WIREs Climate Change*, 9(1), e497. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.497>
- Lang, D. J., Wiek, A., Bergmann, M., Stauffacher, M., Martens, P., Moll, P., Swilling, M., & Thomas, C. J. (2012). Transdisciplinary research in sustainability science: Practice, principles, and challenges. *Sustainability Science*, 7(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-011-0149-x>
- Lawrence, M. G., Williams, S., Nanz, P., & Renn, O. (2022). Characteristics, potentials, and challenges of transdisciplinary research. *One Earth*, 5(1), 44–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.12.010>
- Lövbrand, E., Hjerpe, M., & Linnér, B.-O. (2017). Making climate governance global: How UN climate summitry comes to matter in a complex climate regime. *Environmental Politics*, 26(4), 580–599. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2017.1319019>
- Mar, K. A., Fraude, C., Bruhn, T., Schöpke, N., Stasiak, D., Schroeder, H., Wamsler, C., & Lawrence, M. G. (2021). *Fostering reflection, dialogue and collaboration among actors at the UN climate change conferences*. IASS Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies.
- Marion Suiseeya, K. R., Elhard, D. K., & Paul, C. J. (2021). Toward a relational approach in global climate governance: Exploring the role of trust. *WIREs Climate Change*, 12(4), e712. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.712>
- Marion Suiseeya, K. R., & Zanotti, L. (2019). Making influence visible: Innovating ethnography at the Paris climate summit. *Global Environmental Politics*, 19(2), 38–60. https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00507
- McCrary, G., Holmén, J., Schöpke, N., & Holmberg, J. (2022). Sustainability-oriented labs in transitions: An empirically grounded typology. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 43, 99–117. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2022.03.004>
- Molinengo, G. (2022). Flows of power: An analytical framework for the study of collaboration. *Critical Policy Studies*, 2022, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2022.2037005>
- Molinengo, G., & Stasiak, D. (2020). Scripting, situating, and supervising: The role of artefacts in collaborative practices. *Sustainability*, 12(16), 6407. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12166407>
- Molinengo, G., Stasiak, D., & Freeth, R. (2021). Process expertise in policy advice: Designing collaboration in collaboration. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1), 310. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00990-9>
- Norström, A. V., Cvitanovic, C., Löf, M. F., West, S., Wyborn, C., Balvanera, P., Bednarek, A. T., Bennett, E. M., Biggs, R., de Bremond, A., Campbell, B. M., Canadell, J. G., Carpenter, S. R., Folke, C., Fulton, E. A., Gaffney, O., Gelcich, S., Jouffray, J.-B., Leach, M., ... Österblom, H. (2020). Principles for knowledge co-production in sustainability research. *Nature Sustainability*, 3(3), 182–190. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0448-2>
- Obergassel, W., Bauer, S., Hermwille, L., Aykut, S. C., Boran, I., Chan, S., Fraude, C., Klein, R. J. T., Mar, K. A., Schroeder, H., & Simeonova, K. (2022). From regime-building to implementation: Harnessing the UN climate conferences to drive climate action. *WIREs Climate Change*, 13(6), e797. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.797>
- Ockwell, D., Whitmarsh, L., & O'Neill, S. (2009). Reorienting climate change communication for effective mitigation: Forcing people to be green or fostering grass-roots engagement? *Science Communication*, 30(3), 305–327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547008328969>
- Pereira, L., Frantzeskaki, N., Hebinck, A., Charli-Joseph, L., Drimie, S., Dyer, M., Eakin, H., Galafassi, D., Karpouzoglou, T., Marshall, F., Moore, M.-L., Olsson, P., Siqueiros-García, J. M., van Zwanenberg, P., & Vervoort, J. M. (2020). Transformative spaces in the making: Key lessons from nine cases in the global south. *Sustainability Science*, 15(1), 161–178. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-019-00749-x>
- Rietig, K. (2019). Leveraging the power of learning to overcome negotiation deadlocks in global climate governance and low carbon transitions. *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning*, 21(3), 228–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2019.1632698>
- Rietig, K., & Perkins, R. (2018). Does learning matter for policy outcomes? The case of integrating climate finance into the EU budget. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(4), 487–505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2016.1270345>
- Schot, J., & Geels, F. W. (2008). Strategic niche management and sustainable innovation journeys: Theory, findings, research agenda, and policy. *Technology Analysis & Strategic Management*, 20(5), 537–554. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09537320802292651>
- Schroeder, H., & Lovell, H. (2012). The role of non-nation-state actors and side events in the international climate negotiations. *Climate Policy*, 12(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2011.579328>
- Smith, A., & Raven, R. (2012). What is protective space? Reconsidering niches in transitions to sustainability. *Research Policy*, 41(6), 1025–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2011.12.012>
- Turnhout, E., Metze, T., Wyborn, C., Klenk, N., & Louder, E. (2020). The politics of co-production: Participation, power, and transformation. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 42, 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2019.11.009>
- Vogel, C., & O'Brien, K. (2022). Getting to the heart of transformation. *Sustainability Science*, 17(2), 653–659. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-021-01016-8>

- Wamsler, C., Osberg, G., Osika, W., Herndersson, H., & Mundaca, L. (2021). Linking internal and external transformation for sustainability and climate action: Toward a new research and policy agenda. *Global Environmental Change*, 71, 102373. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102373>
- Wamsler, C., Schöpke, N., Fraude, C., Stasiak, D., Bruhn, T., Lawrence, M., Schroeder, H., & Mundaca, L. (2020). Enabling new mindsets and transformative skills for negotiating and activating climate action: Lessons from UNFCCC conferences of the parties. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 112, 227–235. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2020.06.005>
- Woiwode, C., Schöpke, N., Bina, O., Veciana, S., Kunze, I., Parodi, O., Schweizer-Ries, P., & Wamsler, C. (2021). Inner transformation to sustainability as a deep leverage point: Fostering new avenues for change through dialogue and reflection. *Sustainability Science*, 16(3), 841–858. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-020-00882-y>

How to cite this article: Mar, K. A., Schöpke, N., Fraude, C., Bruhn, T., Wamsler, C., Stasiak, D., Schroeder, H., & Lawrence, M. G. (2023). Learning and community building in support of collective action: Toward a new climate of communication at the COP. *WIREs Climate Change*, e832. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.832>