

# Understanding UNFCCC's Action for Climate Empowerment Framework

From policy to action

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Author(s)

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# Summary

The Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) framework, under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, aims to engage individuals and communities in climate change education, awareness, participation, training, access to information, and international cooperation. This paper seeks to understand how the ACE framework functions in practice by examining concrete examples on the ground. It analyzes the motivations, challenges, and opportunities of stakeholder engagement, with particular focus on the roles of national focal points and non-state actors such as NGOs, IGOs, and youth groups in both international spaces and at the grassroots level. The study also identifies gaps in collaboration between state and non-state actors, noting that ACE implementation often occurs in isolated silos. Recommendations highlight the need for inclusive, coordinated, and well-supported climate initiatives that are fully integrated into national policies and international agreements to ensure sustainable and effective climate governance. Data for this study were collected through literature review, conference observations, interviews with ACE stakeholders, and a questionnaire distributed at the SB60 ACE gallery.

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# 1 Introduction

In the early years of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), negotiations primarily focused on mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, with deliberations centered on emission allowances and reduction commitments, as exemplified by the Kyoto Protocol (1997). While mitigation remains a core objective, advancements in climate science and evolving negotiations have underscored the complexity of addressing climate change. Beyond technical solutions, tackling the climate crisis requires transformative changes across multiple dimensions, including shifts in individual behaviours, such as consumer choices related to diet and mobility, as well as systemic transformations in energy, transportation, food systems, and governance structures. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, including heatwaves, floods, wildfires, and biodiversity loss, threatens lives, food security, and economies worldwide, emphasizing the necessity of immediate and coordinated action.

Recognizing the need for a more comprehensive approach, in the lead-up to the Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC Executive Secretary at the time, Christina Figueres, requested the rebranding of the work associated with Article 6 of the Convention, covering education, public awareness, and participation, under the name Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) (UNFCCC, 2015a).

Also Included in the Paris Agreement under Article 12, ACE highlights the human dimension of climate efforts by drawing attention to six elements: climate change education, public awareness, training, public participation, public access to information, and international cooperation. These elements are seen as essential components for fostering a sustainable and equitable future, empowering individuals and communities to take meaningful climate action. As highlighted by UNESCO (2022), equipping people with the necessary skills, knowledge, and learning environments is crucial for addressing climate challenges and transforming societal attitudes and behaviours. It is now understood that the climate crisis is not merely a technical challenge but also an adaptive one, requiring shifts in behaviour, policy, and decision-making (O'Brien & Selboe, 2015).

Ensuring diverse actor involvement is also crucial for effective and inclusive climate action. These actors include institutions in education and culture such as schools, universities, and museums, along with the private sector, intergovernmental and international organizations, non-governmental organizations, decision-makers, scientists, the media, educators, youth, women, and indigenous peoples. Each of these groups plays a role in advancing climate action by building capacity through education, training, and knowledge sharing (Morrison et al., 2021).

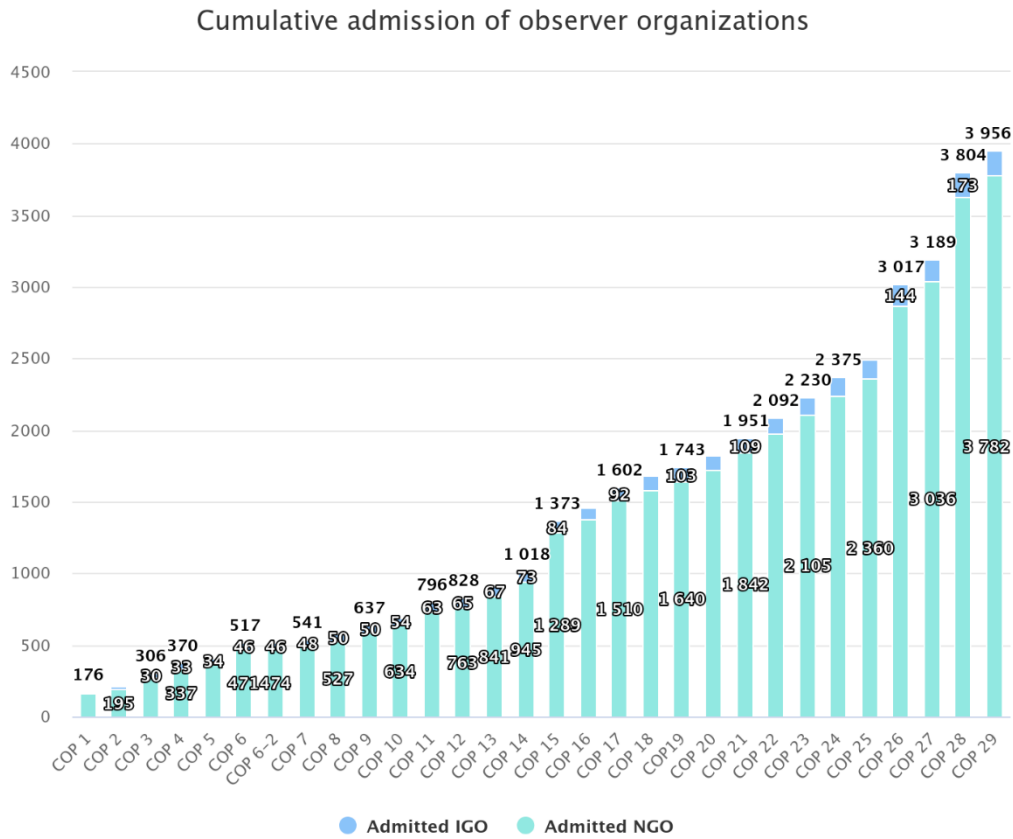
When it comes to ACE as a framework, it aims to advance this cooperation by serving as a tool to bridge together state actors (SAs) and non-state actors (NSAs) at multiple levels to advance climate goals. ACE focuses on empowering individuals and communities at the local and national levels, building their capacity through education, awareness, training, and participation (Bassetti, 2021).

Within the climate governance sphere at UNFCCC conferences, such as Conference of the Parties (COP) and Subsidiary Body (SB) sessions, these NSAs have been, and continue to be, actively involved. They participate in dialogues and activities organized by the Secretariat and other stakeholders, contributing their expertise to the discussions and exercise their role as observers within the negotiation space.

The adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 not only marked a significant shift in climate action, reinforcing the urgent need to limit global temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius, but also reflected a broader transformation in global climate governance. Climate action is no longer viewed as the sole responsibility of SAs. Instead, a broader range of NSAs, such as businesses, NGOs, civil society organizations, and sub-state actors like local governments, regions, or cities, are increasingly involved (Thew, H. et al., 2021).

The number of NSAs participating in COPs and SB sessions has increased each year. (See figure below.) Now a total number of 3,782 NGOs and 174 IGOs are admitted as observers. In the most recent COP29, in total, 66,778 people were registered for on-site attendance, including 33,158 delegates from parties, 13,386 observers, 3,575 members of the media, and 14,473 support and Secretariat staff. Of the observers, 1,880 were guests of the host country, Azerbaijan. Another 3,975 people, comprising 157 delegates from parties and 3,818 observers, registered for online participation (UNFCCC, n.d, Statistics on.

FIGURE 1 STATISTICS ON ADMISSION



Source: Cumulative admission of observer organizations, (UNFCCC, n.d)

As a result, the UNFCCC’s role has also evolved from overseeing government-level negotiations to facilitating initiatives led by non-governmental stakeholders, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative approach to climate governance.

Building on this shift, this paper analyses how ACE works in practice and the different roles that various actors play within this space. By analysing their dynamics, we seek to better understand the interplay between ACE initiatives and the broader participatory processes that shape climate action. Additionally, we explore how ACE serves as a catalyst for meaningful participation within the climate governance sphere.

The next section of this paper outlines the methodological approach adopted for this study. Section 3 provides an overview of the ACE framework, tracing its history and evolution since 1992, highlighting its six elements, and examining current implementation practices by different countries. In Section 4, the various actors involved in the framework are explored, focusing on both SAs and NSAs, their roles in ground-level implementation, and their role in climate conferences. Section 5 addresses the challenges encountered in ACE implementation, followed by reflections and recommendations in the conclusion.

## 2 Methodology

This discussion paper aims to examine the role of ACE within the UNFCCC and the broader international climate governance framework, as well as explore its ideal function(s). Specifically, we ask: How does ACE operate in practice? Does it serve as a catalyst for meaningful participation across different levels, including various stakeholders within the UNFCCC, NGOs, and citizens at the local level, as well as in climate governance decision-making processes? How effective is ACE as a tool in fostering collaboration between the UN Secretariat and stakeholders, and how does this translate into tangible outcomes at the grassroots level?

To address these questions, we conducted an analysis of different treaty documents related to ACE including the 1992 UNFCCC Convention, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the 2012 Doha Work Programme, the 2015 Paris Agreement, and the 2021 Glasgow Work Programme. This was complemented by a review of relevant academic literature related to ACE, noting that the available literature on ACE is very limited. The literature review aimed to complement the analysis by reflecting on ACE outcomes and their wider relevance.

Observations were made at the SB60 in Bonn, Germany, as well as COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan. The purpose of the conference participation was to observe the ACE activities organized by the Secretariat, examine stakeholder engagement in these activities, and understand their role in these conferences.

At SB60 in Bonn, we distributed a questionnaire during the ACE Gallery - a poster session on ACE organized on 8 June 2024, focused on tools and support for ACE implementation. There were two hours for personal interaction, during which 21 posters were showcased. The questionnaire was filled out by 12 attendees who were presenting a poster. Seven represented NGOs, 4 were part of YOUNGO (the Youth Constituency), and 1 represented an IGO (see table nr. 1 below). The questionnaire aimed to understand the primary motivations of these stakeholders for working with ACE and participating in such activities. Specifically, it sought to determine whether their involvement was driven by the desire to contribute to a more comprehensive and informed climate action framework, to enhance the efficiency and legitimacy of climate governance, or to support the democratic ideal of inclusive participation in decision-making processes (see table nr. 2 below).

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with different stakeholders directly involved in ACE. The interviews, which lasted between 25 - 40 minutes, included 9 National Focal Points (NFPs) from 5 different regions of the world. Additionally, 3 representatives from Intergovernmental Organizations and 6 representatives from NGOs engaged in ACE-related activities were interviewed (see Table 3 below). Sixteen of the interviews were conducted via the ZOOM platform, recorded, and transcribed, while 2 were done in writing. The primary objective of these interviews was to gain a general understanding of how ACE operates in practice, including identifying success factors and challenges for its implementation. Furthermore, the interviews aimed to explore how stakeholders involved in ACE monitor and report on its implementation, the mechanisms they use for this purpose, and the nature of collaboration among different stakeholders in advancing ACE efforts.

By integrating these methods and questions, we aim to understand how ACE functions as a tool, explore the dynamics among stakeholders involved in ACE initiatives, and examine how actors collaborate to advance ACE and contribute to broader climate action within society.

TABLE 1: QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS

Header	Affiliation	Role	World Region
R1	NGO	Co-Executive Director	Middle East, North Africa, and Greater Arabia
R2	YOUNGO	Member	Sub-Saharan Africa
R3	NGO	Program Assistant	Europe
R4	NGO	Program Officer	Europe
R5	NGO	Program Assistant	Europe
R6	NGO	Executive Director	Sub-Saharan Africa
R7	IGO	Team Leader	Europe
R8	YOUNGO	Member	Middle East, North Africa, and Greater Arabia
R9	Youth	N/A	Middle East, North Africa, and Greater Arabia
R10	NGO	Program and Policy Director	Europe
R11	Research Institute	Research Assistant	Asia
R12	YOUNGO	Member	Europe

# 3 Understanding action for climate empowerment

## 3.1 Six elements of ACE

ACE aims to advance six key elements: education, training, public awareness, public participation, access to information, and international cooperation. While each component plays a crucial role individually, they are most effective when integrated, working together to engage and empower people in climate action.

FIGURE 2: SIX ELEMENTS OF ACE



Source: Action for Climate Empowerment, (UNFCCC, n.d).

Below we provide a brief description of each ACE element and an example of a corresponding ACE activity, based on the data gathered for this research.

**Education** focuses on building awareness, and developing effective teaching methods to address the climate crisis. (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016). This element aims to create a society that understands the challenges of climate change and is committed to taking action at the national level. (UNFCCC, 2024b)

For example, Finland has integrated climate change education into its compulsory basic education system through a cross-curricular approach. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) embeds sustainability as a core element, ensuring that climate issues are addressed in various subjects, especially geography and biology. The curriculum promotes a holistic approach to sustainability, covering ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Similarly, the Upper Secondary Curriculum (2019) emphasizes sustainable development, encouraging students (ages 16–19) to actively support climate action. Schools incorporate sustainability into teaching, daily operations, and community practices, aiming to foster long-term climate awareness and responsibility (Ministry of the Environment & Statistics Finland, 2022).

**Public awareness** initiatives aim to shape public perception, enhance understanding, and promoting climate-friendly behaviours. They focus on improving understanding of climate risks, policies, and solutions through targeted communication and outreach (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016). Engaging diverse stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, UN agencies, media, and communities, public awareness initiatives usually aim to inspire action, encourage individual sustainable choices, and create momentum for climate policies and investments at all levels. (UNFCCC, 2024b).

For example, the Dominican Republic has prioritized public awareness on climate change through surveys, campaigns, and multi-stakeholder collaborations. Through a national survey in 2012, the government established a baseline for public knowledge and perception of climate risks, adaptation, and mitigation. Since that survey, government institutions, municipalities, NGOs, and the private sector have launched ongoing awareness programs. These efforts use traditional (TV, radio, newspapers) and digital (social platforms, online campaigns) media to simplify climate messages and encourage small but impactful actions. (Dominican Republic, 2020)

**Training** equips individuals with practical skills essential for implementing mitigation and adaptation actions, supporting NDC targets, and ensuring a just transition. It focuses on skilling, reskilling, and upskilling the workforce to access decent work opportunities in a low-carbon economy. (UNFCCC, 2024b). Governments, academic institutions, trade unions, businesses, and communities should play a key role in delivering training programs that provide hands-on learning in areas such as climate data analysis, emissions tracking, and sustainable technologies. (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016)

For example, in Ghana, a media survey conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified key challenges that journalists face in reporting on environmental and climate issues, including difficulty understanding scientific concepts, lack of training in translating technical information for the public, and limited knowledge of reliable sources. To address these gaps, the EPA organized three training workshops in 2019 at the Institute of Environmental Studies (IES) in Accra. The workshops, titled “Demystifying Environmental Issues: The Role of Media Editors,” aimed to enhance journalists’ understanding of environmental policies, climate change, and chemical management. Around 90 journalists from state and private media participated, gaining essential skills and resources to improve public education on environmental sustainability. (Ghana, 2020)

**Public participation** strengthens climate action by fostering inclusivity, ensuring that diverse voices contribute to decision-making, and enhancing public ownership of policies (UNFCCC, n.d, Action for Climate Empowerment). Engaging civil society, the private sector, and communities in climate planning, implementation, and evaluation leads to broader support and more effective outcomes (UNFCCC, 2024b). Governments should create mechanisms for dialogue, coordination, and collaboration across all levels of society. By integrating public input and encouraging active involvement in order a shift toward more transparent and responsive governance (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016).

For example, Uruguay promotes inclusive public participation in defining national climate priorities, ensuring the active involvement of diverse social groups, including urban and rural populations, youth, women, people with disabilities, migrants, and vulnerable communities affected by climate change. The country seeks to identify climate representatives from civil society, the private sector, and knowledge sectors at both urban and rural levels to engage in national dialogue. Additionally, efforts are made to map participation spaces, analyse their functioning, and define the roles of key actors to strengthen public engagement in climate decision-making. (Ministry of Environment of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay & SNRCC, 2022)

**Public access to information** aims to enhance transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making in climate action. By ensuring timely and accurate dissemination of climate data, governments can strengthen public engagement and compliance with climate policies. Regulations that mandate information-sharing across public and private sectors help create clarity for businesses and accessibility for citizens. (UNFCCC, 2024b) Digital tools such as online databases and open data platforms play a key role in making climate information widely available (UNFCCC, n.d, Action for Climate Empowerment). Beyond simply sharing knowledge, public access to information fosters two-way communication, connecting policymakers, practitioners, and communities to drive more effective and inclusive climate action. (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016)

For example: Ghana’s EPA established an online Climate Change Data Hub to enhance public access to climate-related information. The platform serves as a central repository with five key portals: greenhouse gas inventory, project registry, policies and measures, Nationally Determined Contributions NDCs, and Green Climate Fund (GCF). The greenhouse gas portal provides up-to-date inventory data, including emissions factors and activity data. The project registry tracks climate actions, their impacts, and financial support received. (Ghana, 2020)

**International cooperation** enhances the effectiveness of ACE by facilitating the exchange of knowledge, technical expertise, and resources (UNFCCC, 2024b), (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016). Through collaboration at regional and global levels, governments and organizations can support each other in developing and implementing climate education, training, public awareness, and participation initiatives (UNFCCC, 2024b). Sharing best practices at conferences, workshops, and exchange programs strengthens institutional capacity and helps integrate ACE into national policies. By mobilizing financial and technical resources, international cooperation ensures that all countries, especially those with limited capacities, can advance climate action and build more inclusive, informed, and resilient societies.

For example, this element is largely fulfilled by the very nature of ACE as a framework within the UNFCCC. Mandated negotiations and dialogues serve as the primary venues for interaction among ACE National Focal Points, while NSAs are also invited to participate in events such as the Poster Session. Additionally, the annual Dialogue on ACE provides a regular forum for Parties and other stakeholders to share experiences, exchange ideas, and discuss good practices and lessons learned regarding the implementation of Article 6 of the Convention and Article 12 of the Paris Agreement.

## 3.2 ACE history

The ACE Framework was shaped by years of global agreements that focused on engaging people worldwide in environmental action, especially regarding climate change. (Morrison, D. et al, 2021). The foundation of ACE can be traced back to Article 6 of the UNFCCC, established in 1992, which highlights the importance of "education, training, and public awareness" in facilitating global climate action (UNFCCC, 1992). This was reinforced by Article 10 (e) of the Kyoto Protocol (1997)<sup>1</sup> and further developed through various international agreements. The New Delhi Work Programme adopted at COP 8 provided a framework for country-driven action on Article 6 (UNFCCC, 2007). In 2012, COP 18 introduced the eight-year Doha Work Programme on Article 6, promoting national support and annual dialogues for exchanging experiences (UNFCCC, 2012). By 2015, in the Paris Agreement, efforts under Article 6 of the UNFCCC were rebranded as Action for Climate Empowerment. Article 12 of the Paris Agreement states: "Parties shall cooperate in taking measures, as appropriate, to enhance climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information, recognizing the importance of these steps with respect to enhancing actions under this Agreement" (UNFCCC, 2015b).

Later on, at COP 26 in 2021, the Glasgow Work Programme on ACE marks a significant evolution in guiding national efforts as it introduced a flexible 10-year framework, replacing the previous Doha work programme from 2012, and aligning more closely with the Paris Agreement's objectives. Different from earlier documents, the Glasgow Work Programme integrates activities under both Article 6 of the UNFCCC and Article 12 of the Paris Agreement, ensuring greater alignment with contemporary climate goals. A notable feature of this programme is its heightened focus on youth engagement, acknowledging young people as pivotal agents of change and emphasizing their inclusion in climate decision-making (UNFCCC 2021a).

The Glasgow Work Programme introduced four key priority areas: Policy Coherence, Coordinated Action, Tools and Support, and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting. Each area is designed to advance the six elements of ACE in a more structured and meaningful way (UNFCCC 2021a).

**Policy Coherence:** This area promotes coordination at both international and national levels, urging countries to develop and implement strategies that integrate all ACE elements and foster cross-sectoral collaboration (UNFCCC 2021a).

**Coordinated Action:** It emphasizes building partnerships that bring together diverse expertise and resources, enhancing collaborative climate action efforts (UNFCCC 2021a).

**Tools and Support:** Focuses on providing essential tools and support for capacity building and awareness-raising, while strengthening relationships between governments and

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperate in and promote at the international level, and, where appropriate, using existing bodies, the development and implementation of education and training programmes, including the strengthening of national capacity building, in particular human and institutional capacities and the exchange or secondment of personnel to train experts in this field, in particular for developing countries, and facilitate at the national level public awareness and public access to information on climate change. Suitable modalities should be developed to implement these activities through the relevant bodies of the Convention taking into account Article 6 of the Convention;

various stakeholders, including national institutions, associations, and civil society (UNFCCC 2021a).

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting: Enhances the processes for tracking and assessing the implementation of ACE elements, ensuring accountability and progress (UNFCCC 2021a).

### 3.3 Implementation of ACE in practice

Many countries are progressing toward their commitments to the ACE agenda, although these commitments vary widely, and several factors shape different approaches that countries follow. Each country's climate situation is unique and has varying challenges, so tailored approaches to climate action are needed (UNESCO and UNFCCC, 2016). Different countries have different levels of commitment when it comes to prioritizing climate issues (INT-02-gov). This is evident in their national plans, climate policies, and cross-sectoral collaboration. For example, incorporating climate change into national education curricula requires strong coordination between the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Education (INT-08-gov). Partnerships between and within governments, international organizations, and civil society groups also vary across countries and regions. Such collaborations are crucial as they provide the support, expertise, and resources necessary to advance ACE activities.

Implementation is closely tied to funding, and the varying approaches to ACE funding are reflected in the different strategies for its implementation. During the expert interviews, NFPs were asked how their ACE work is funded. From their answers, we can analyse the different approaches they have taken to funding ACE initiatives. Eight out of nine NFPs stated that their governments do not have a specific budget line for ACE activities.

From their responses, we can observe that countries adopt a mix of integrated funding mechanisms, leveraging internal government budgets, international cooperation, public-private partnerships, and other creative strategies.

Some countries have prioritized mainstreaming ACE funding into broader climate and sustainability initiatives rather than isolating it as a standalone budget item (INT-02-gov, INT-04-gov, INT-09-gov). Funding for ACE-related initiatives is integrated across various ministries and activities, such as consumer education and environmental campaigns. While this approach ensures that some ACE-related activities are funded, there is no distinct ACE budget (INT-02-gov). This method is often used to avoid siloing ACE and to align it with broader climate and education efforts, potentially increasing the overall resources indirectly devoted to ACE activities.

Other countries have clearer pathways to fund ACE activities, either within their government budgets or through external partnerships. While only one interviewee (INT-05-gov) mentioned having a dedicated budget line for ACE within their government, others (INT-08-gov, INT-01-gov, INT-03-gov) indicated that even without a specific budget line, they mobilize resources to fund ACE elements. These resources are often mobilized through collaborations with different organizations or IGOs to enhance ACE components, such as awareness or participation. A blended funding approach is also mentioned, incorporating public-private partnerships and international collaboration. For example, capacity-building activities are co-funded by multiple stakeholders, including private sector contributions, international consultants, and academia, which often provide venues (INT-03-gov). Usually, this approach allows for better tracking and accountability of funds used specifically for ACE activities.

When reviewing various activities that include ACE elements, most countries prioritize the education component, recognizing that long-term climate action is best achieved through the transformative power of education. The education component aims to create lasting shifts in climate awareness, particularly among younger generations (UNESCO & Monitoring and Sustainability Education Research Institute, University of Saskatchewan, 2024). This is usually accomplished by integrating climate change into school curricula across subjects, from mathematics to music (INT-04-gov), starting at an early age, as well as by providing specialized training for teachers.

For example, since 2016 Ghana has started implementing the National Climate Change and Green Economy Learning Strategy and over 2,000 primary teachers have been trained on climate change and green economy (Ghana, 2016). The Dominican Republic has introduced several policies to improve formal climate education in the country. They have focused on the development of capacity and skills of individuals in the short term, enhancing

climate-related learning for key sectors, and enabling the education system better to convey climate issues. The Dominican Republic's Training Program for Capacity Building on Climate Change has trained around 3,500 teachers to date. A recently-passed legislation is envisioned to pave the way for formal climate education programs across levels and institutions to ensure that it is integrated into the school system public and private at every stage. To this effect, the strategy of the Dominican Republic by 2030 is to integrate climate education into the national professional development system, higher education curricula, and training programs for teachers so that environmental sensitivity will be raised throughout the country as stated in their Nationally Determined Contribution (Dominican Republic, 2020).

In Finland, unlike most countries, the national focal point is situated within the Ministry of Education. This has enabled Finland to prioritize the integration of climate change in both basic and upper secondary education and incorporate sustainability as a key value in its curriculum. The goal is that by the time the students are 16 to 19 years of age they have firm-based information about sustainability and climate. This is done by including climate change education programs that range from environmental studies to energy and technology (Ministry of the Environment & Statistics Finland, 2022).

While activities under the education and training components are easier to track and understand due to educational structures being already in place, some countries are also advancing their work towards other ACE elements. Italy is one interesting example. Although the country does not have an ACE-specific strategy, it has made progress in implementing several elements of ACE in recent years. One of these leading global efforts is called Youth4Climate, which is co-led by Italy in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This initiative is focused on gathering a range of resources, partnerships, tools, and networks that are designed by young people in innovative ways. The goal is to advance and achieve youth-led and youth-inclusive climate actions that will contribute toward long-lasting impacts at the grassroots level. It offers young leaders and any climate stakeholder an online platform where they can connect, share experiences, and exchange opportunities. Today, it has close to 7,000 members from around the world, with a representation of international organizations, academia, and the private sector (Youth4Climate, n.d).

In recent years, a few countries have started to adopt an ACE Strategy. For example, Uruguay has created a specific National Strategy for ACE called the National Action Strategy for Climate Empowerment (ENACE). This strategy contributes to further strengthening the National Environmental Policy and it also serves as the basis for the capacity-building section involving the countries' institutions that engage in public policies with the ACE components with specific measures. This strategy also has a specific action plan that guides its work. Through this strategy, the country aims to tackle the six elements of ACE with several objectives that include the improvement of knowledge on climate change in both formal and non-formal education through an interdisciplinary approach, further consolidating the research teams and networks that focus on knowledge and innovation on climate change, and improving the technical and professional skills to better the decision-making capabilities in regards to the international climate agenda. This strategy also focuses on awareness-raising by designing a communication framework to keep the public well informed on the impacts of climate change, engage citizens, civil society, and the private sector in initiatives to contribute at all levels of government to the cultural change toward resilience and low-carbon development with sustainable development. (Ministry of Environment of the Eastern Republic of Uruguay & SNRCC, 2022)

# 4 The role of different stakeholders engaged in the ACE framework

## 4.1 State actors: The role of National Focal Points

One interesting role within the ACE framework is that of the National Focal Points (NFPs) for ACE, first mandated in the Doha Work Programme (UNFCCC 2012)<sup>2</sup> and later in the Glasgow Work Programme (UNFCCC 2021a).<sup>3</sup> The role of NFPs within the UNFCCC has been significant, as the growing complexity of climate change issues has emphasized the need for closer collaboration between parties themselves but also the collaboration between the Parties and the UNFCCC Secretariat (UNFCCC, 2020). To date, 139 countries have appointed ACE NFPs (UNFCCC, n.d, National ACE Focal Points), showing commitment to advancing the framework. Their primary role is to facilitate and advance the implementation of ACE at a national level in climate-related education and engagement activities (UNESCO and UNFCCC 2016). In addition to implementation, their responsibilities include integrating ACE principles into national climate policies, adaptation plans, and mitigation strategies in relation to Article 12 of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2018). NFPs are typically designated within Ministries of Environment or affiliated environmental agencies, depending on the governmental structures of each country. This is because, at the international level, NFPs usually are also responsible for participating in Climate Change Negotiations and annual ACE dialogues at the first regular session of each year, as requested by Parties under the adopted 10-year Glasgow Work Programme<sup>4</sup> (UNFCCC 2021a). NFPs play a key role in encouraging international collaboration and enhancing synergies with other conventions to amplify the impact of climate education, empowerment, and public engagement while aligning ACE principles with broader climate goals (UNESCO and UNFCCC 2016). The Glasgow Work Programme emphasizes the necessity to support national ACE focal points by assigning responsibilities, providing resources, and facilitating access to information and materials (UNFCCC, 2021a). In alignment with this, since 2022, the ACE Focal Points Academy has been implemented to strengthen the international and regional network of focal points through workshops focused on capacity-building, knowledge sharing, and peer support to advance the implementation of ACE (UNFCCC, 2021b). Currently, approximately 60.9% of designated NFPs are part of Environmental Ministries or agencies (UNFCCC, n.d, National ACE Focal Points), while others are associated with Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Agriculture, Energy, Tourism, Urbanism, and Development or General Government Administration.

In the cases when the ACE NFPs serve as negotiators for ACE within COP and SB sessions, their capacity to engage in the practical implementation of activities at the national level can be significantly constrained (INT-04-gov). This is further compounded by the

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<sup>2</sup> (a) "Designate and provide support, including technical and financial support, and access to information and materials to a national focal point for Article 6 activities and assign specific responsibilities. These responsibilities could include the identification of areas for possible international cooperation and opportunities for strengthening synergies with other conventions, and the coordination of the preparation of the Article 6 chapter in the national communications, ensuring that relevant contact information, including web addresses, is provided therein";

<sup>3</sup> "In addition, at the national level, Parties are also encouraged to continue designating, assigning responsibilities to, and providing support, including technical and financial support, and access to information and materials to national ACE focal points. Such responsibilities could include identifying areas for possible international cooperation and opportunities for strengthening synergies with action under other conventions, and coordinating the preparation of the chapter on ACE in national communications, ensuring that relevant contact information, including weblinks, is provided therein".

<sup>4</sup> "Hold an annual in-session Action for Climate Empowerment dialogue at its first regular session of each year with the participation of Parties, representatives of relevant constituted bodies, and relevant experts, practitioners and stakeholders that focuses on the progress of implementation of the Glasgow work programme and on its four priority areas: policy coherence; coordinated action; tools and support; and monitoring, evaluation and reporting"

collaboration required with the private sector and local governments, particularly municipalities, which play a crucial role in implementing climate-related initiatives at the community level. Based on the collected data, the various activities carried out by NGOs working on the ground with ACE elements and advancing the ACE agenda are often not communicated through the national communications of countries. This is primarily due to the broad scope of ACE, which encompasses a wide range of elements that are difficult to track. Additionally, many countries lack a formal ACE strategy or established metrics to monitor and assess ACE-related activities, further complicating the documenting and reporting of these efforts.

On the other hand, if the ACE focal point is situated within another Ministry, as observed in the case of Finland (Ministry of Education), it often becomes difficult for the focal point to align its (nationally-focused) work with international efforts and effectively engage in the negotiation processes as the delegations are typically composed of representatives from the Ministry of Environment.

## 4.2 Non-state actors

ACE work is happening not only at the governmental level, as different NSAs are working on implementing and advancing the six elements of ACE within their respective communities. While the role of the NFPs is essential for advancing ACE at several levels, governmental efforts alone are not the sole contributors to strengthening the framework. Significant progress in ACE implementation also stems from NSAs' work in advancing the framework. One of the core principles of ACE is that its objectives cannot be achieved through the efforts of a single actor, rather, it requires the active involvement of a wide range of stakeholders to drive meaningful climate action. This is reinforced in several documents adopted over the years during the climate negotiations, by countries, thus reaffirming the vital contributions that NSAs make in advancing ACE (UNFCCC, 2018).

During the 2024 ACE gallery, 21 initiatives were presented, with posters displayed by a diverse group of stakeholders: 10 NGOs, 7 IGOs, 1 constituency, 1 media organization, and 1 government (UNFCCC, 2024a).

From our collected data we notice that ACE-related activities usually try to tackle one or several elements (but not all) depending on the priorities of the projects or the priorities of the NGO working on it. These activities can also take various forms. For example, Greenish Foundation has pioneered environmental education in the Middle East through the establishment of Greenish Clubs and the launch of the region's first Environmental Training Guide. This guide equips university co-founders with skills in participant recruitment, social entrepreneurship, and environmental leadership. The program combines research, practical application, and training, preparing participants to address climate change, waste management, biodiversity, and renewable energy while enhancing environmental communication.

SYCLAN Trust empowers youth in climate policy by developing frameworks for their engagement at both national and global levels, including within the UNFCCC and other multilateral forums. Aligned with ACE principles, the framework is created through a participatory process, promoting direct youth involvement in multilateral processes such as SB meetings, COP sessions, and regional climate weeks.

Climate Outreach plays a pivotal role in promoting public engagement under climate action. Climate Outreach co-founded the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), a European initiative fostering informed input on climate assemblies. Although Climate Outreach has not directly organized citizen assemblies, KNOCA unites organizations and leaders with expertise in this area, balancing academic rigor, practical application, and accessibility.

In many of these cases, ACE-related work is usually incorporated into already funded projects. From the data collected via the questionnaires and the expert interviews, NGO category participants reported a wide range of funding sources. Many relied on voluntary efforts and grants from donors, foundations, and international funding organizations. Some received support from local partnerships and philanthropic donations, while others secured funding from sources such as EU donors and bilateral grants. A few mentioned governmental supports from ministries. However, a significant portion indicated that their ACE initiatives were largely unfunded or entirely without dedicated funding.

While the role of various stakeholders engaging with ACE is seen as very beneficial it is important to understand the reasons for their participation within the framework.

Looking at the questionnaire responses (Table 2) we notice that 11 out of 12 participants responded that their motivation for engaging in ACE-related work is to influence policy either at local, national, or international level. Followed by the drive to empower and amplify the marginalized voice within spaces for climate policy and action and to educate and raise awareness about climate change, its impacts, and possibilities for action (both 8/12).

Other reasons also were chosen such as building and strengthening networks and communities for climate action (7/12,) contributing to climate action in their community or context (6/12), ensure that stakeholder expertise is considered in decision-making processes (5/12) and promote inclusivity and participation in climate governance (5/12).

These responses indicate that ACE practitioners see ACE as a tool that can contribute to systemic change, whether through policy influence, representation of marginalized groups, or public education. The overlap between these motivations shows also that these areas are interconnected, raising awareness and education often serve as a foundation for advocacy and policy influence. Additionally, the strong emphasis on inclusion and justice reflects the evolving role of ACE as a tool not only for climate education but also for democratizing climate action taking a more normative approach.

TABLE 2 QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES: MOTIVATION FOR ENGAGEMENT

Motivation for Engagement	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	R6	R7	R8	R9	R10	R11	R12	Total
Spurring and/or contributing to climate action in my community or context	+	+				+		+			+	+	6
Influencing policy	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	11
Empowering and amplifying marginalized voices within spaces for climate policy and action	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+			8
Educating and raising awareness about climate change, its impacts, and possibilities for action	+	+	+	+		+		+			+	+	9
Building and strengthening networks and communities for climate action	+	+		+		+	+	+			+		7
Ensuring that stakeholder expertise is considered in decision-making processes	+	+		+	+	+							5
Promoting inclusivity and participation in climate governance	+	+		+		+			+				5

#### 4.2.1 Non-state actor role within the ACE negotiation space

During the 60th session of SB and COP29, the ACE Secretariat together with the COP Presidency organized various activities to enhance collaboration among stakeholders. At SB60, the annual ACE Dialogue provided a platform for party and non-party stakeholders to exchange ideas, share best practices, and discuss challenges in ACE implementation, focusing on tools and support. This session included a workshop on drafting effective project proposals, guided by Decisions 23/CP.27 and 22/CMA.4. Additionally, the Secretariat hosted the ACE Gallery, showcasing tools and resources to support ACE initiatives and enhance public engagement.

At COP29 in Baku, the COP Presidency, in collaboration with the ACE Secretariat and YOUNGO, organized a series of thematic dialogue sessions that addressed key topics such as intergenerational equity in climate finance, health, and educational equity in climate action, youth engagement in NDCs, sustainable agriculture and resource management, and the challenges of climate mobility and loss and damage.

Observer organizations played an active role during the ACE-mandated events. For example, during the Presidency Event on ACE with the “Advancing Climate Transparency: Opportunities through Action for Climate Empowerment,” the sessions were co-moderated by an ACE negotiator and a representative from the civil society organization Climate Outreach. The World Café discussions were facilitated by a diverse group, including ACE negotiators, NFPs, representatives from various organizations and universities, YOUNGO

members, and media representatives. These discussions are later included in the UNFCCC annual reports.

The participatory nature of ACE is also evident in the negotiation processes, which actively engages observers, including civil society, academia, women, and youth. During the ACE negotiations at COP 29 in Baku, we witnessed that observers were not only granted the opportunity to deliver a concluding speech but were also present during consultations known as the “informal informals”, a space typically reserved only for party delegations. Usually based on the rules of procedure states maintain the authority to conduct closed-door meetings at their discretion (Nasiritousi & Linnér, 2016).

Throughout these conferences, various stakeholders, including Parties, UN agencies, civil society organizations, youth groups, and academia, closely collaborate in jointly organized side events, co-moderated discussions, and multi-stakeholder dialogues. This collaboration is often facilitated by the Secretariat, which provides platforms for engagement, capacity-building spaces, and opportunities for knowledge exchange. In these settings, stakeholders play a crucial role as contributors of expertise and diverse perspectives, particularly those working directly with their respective communities.

The collaborative nature of ACE activities closely aligns with the motivations expressed by stakeholders in the questionnaire responses. Many stakeholders engage in ACE-related work to influence policy at local, national, and international levels, a goal that is actively supported through multi-stakeholder dialogues, co-moderated discussions, and side events. These platforms provide valuable opportunities for stakeholders to share their expertise, advocate for policy changes, and contribute to decision-making processes. Additionally, the strong emphasis on inclusivity within these events reflects another key motivation - empowering marginalized voices in climate policy and action. By facilitating engagement among diverse actors, particularly those working directly with communities, these collaborative spaces ensure that a wide range of perspectives are represented. This aligns with stakeholders' drive to promote equity, justice, and participatory governance within the ACE framework.

# 5 Challenges in ACE implementation

To better understand how ACE works in practice, it is crucial to examine the challenges faced involved in its implementation. While ACE's primary focus is to engage and empower communities, some ambiguities and challenges persist, raising questions about the effectiveness of this ambitious framework (Alessandro Caprini et al., 2020). The gathered data from the expert interviews helped to identify the specific constraints and challenges encountered in working with ACE from the different actors involved (NFP, IGO, NGO). Despite having different capacities and working at different levels, several common challenges were identified during the interviews, with patterns emerging across the responses.

## 5.1 Financial and resource constraints

One challenge that was mentioned by all of the three categories is financial and resource constraints (15 times). As mentioned, in most countries there is often no dedicated national budget for climate change education or ACE-related activities and focal points are left to mobilize funds on their own, often seeking support from international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. Even when funding is available for education, it is rarely aligned with the ACE agenda, creating a significant gap between national programs and ACE's objectives (INT-01-gov).

Even for NGOs, since there is no dedicated funding mechanism, it forces them to rely on self-funding or incorporate ACE elements into broader, unrelated projects. This lack of financial support not only limits the scope of ACE initiatives but also affects their sustainability and long-term impact (INT-15-ngo, INT-16-ngo).

Resource constraints often extend beyond financial limitations to include personnel and institutional capacity. ACE focal points often have to manage multiple responsibilities across different sectors, stretching their already limited resources. In many cases, dialogues and initiatives become mechanical, driven more by the need to meet international commitments than by a strategic vision (INT-04-gov). Due to these constraints, there is a relatively small number of countries that participate in ACE dialogues, and the impact of such efforts is often marginal, raising questions about their overall effectiveness (INT-04-gov). IGOs also underscore the need for greater investment in ACE-related activities. Without adequate funding, efforts to develop effective educational tools, training programs, and methodologies are severely limited (INT-10-igo, INT-11-igo).

## 5.2 Lack of awareness and recognition for ACE

Another frequently mentioned challenge (8 times) for ACE implementation is the lack of awareness and recognition of the framework itself. Despite its central focus on empowerment, many stakeholders, including civil society and government actors, fail to recognize ACE as a distinct framework. Activities that target ACE elements are often not explicitly labelled or treated as ACE initiatives. During our interviews, only 3 out of 20 initiatives that were mentioned as successful activity examples were explicitly labelled as ACE activities or referenced ACE in their project proposals. Governments often integrate climate empowerment within broader policy frameworks rather than treating it as a standalone agenda, arguing that this approach fosters more organic and inclusive progress toward ACE objectives (INT-06-gov). Instead of developing separate ACE-specific strategies, countries choose to embed core ACE principles, such as empowerment, capacity building, and awareness-raising, into existing national policies and sectoral strategies. These efforts are then later reported in National Communications (INT-01-gov). However, they also argue that sometimes this could potentially lead to fragmented efforts and missed opportunities, as work being done in areas such as education, training, and public participation is often disconnected from the framework. This leads to ACE being overshadowed, as it typically receives less attention, funding, and resources compared to other negotiation topics. Adding to this, ACE usually is misconceived as a framework dedicated solely to education or youth engagement, leading to a lack of serious attention or resources which contradicts one of its purposes of engaging a diverse audience from different generations and

professions (INT-03-gov). It was also mentioned that there seems to be a low level of understanding of ACE as a concept (INT-06-gov, INT-08-gov, INT-10-igo, INT-13-ngo). While every individual doesn't need to grasp the framework in detail, policies and initiatives grounded in ACE must be well-embedded and supported at all levels. (INT-10-igo)

### 5.3 Other challenges

Currently, there is no standardized system for tracking ACE progress, mainly because there is no unified approach to implementing ACE. This is due to the wide variety of socio-economic conditions, cultural differences, and political environments around the world. These differences make it difficult to hold stakeholders accountable or measure the impact of their efforts. Interviews also highlighted that the lack of clear metrics and that the broad scope of ACE makes it harder to track these activities. Interviews highlight that there is also a lack of clear methods and guidance for creating effective ACE programs suited to specific contexts (INT-11-igo). While many projects include ACE elements, they often do not have the strategic frameworks needed for long-term success.

One other challenge appears to be the breaking down of silos within and between sectors. Even within small countries, there is often a disconnect between stakeholders in the education, the environment, and climate sectors (INT-04-gov, INT-08-gov, INT-10-igo). One of the significant challenges related to the advancement of ACE, when it comes to reporting mechanisms and developing a national ACE strategy, is the need for resource mobilization and the enhancement of inter-ministerial collaboration. Specifically, the critical importance of fostering partnerships between the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Education to effectively implement ACE initiatives and to create better strategies.

NGOs also mentioned that working with the government sometimes poses a challenge, particularly when it comes to integrating climate-related elements into educational curriculums (INT-16-ngo). These dynamics are interesting due to the observed lack of collaboration between NGOs and governments, as highlighted during the interviews. There is often no comprehensive mapping of the work being carried out at the national level by various NGOs and other non-state actors, especially in bigger countries. As a result, NGOs frequently rely on platforms provided by the UNFCCC to report on their activities related to ACE or to engage in dialogues with government officials. (INT-16-ngo)

The hashtags in the table represent selected themes and patterns identified from the responses of interview participants. These challenges reflect the issues and barriers commonly faced by the participants in relation to the implementation of the ACE framework.

TABLE 3 INTERVIEW DATA

Interview Code	Role/Affiliation	World Region	ACE Strategy	ACE budget line	Challenges
INT-01-gov	National focal point - government	Sub-Saharan Africa	Yes	No	#resource constraints #resource mobilization #funding stability
INT-02-gov	National focal point - government	Europe	No	No	#political framing
INT-03-gov	National focal point - government	Central America and the Caribbean	No	No	#youth focus bias #perception barrier #negotiation stagnation #funding stability
INT-04-gov	National focal point - government	Europe	No	No	#resource constraints #lack of visibility/recognition
INT-05-gov	National focal point - government	Central America and the Caribbean	No	Yes	#perception barrier #mindset shift #funding stability
INT-06-gov	National focal point - government	North America	No	No	#too broad #resource constraints
INT-07-gov	National focal point - government	South America	Yes	No	#resource constraints #funding stability
INT-08-gov	National focal point - government	Europe	No	No	#negotiation stagnation #cross-sectoral collaboration
INT-09-gov	National focal point - government	Europe	Yes	No	#resource constraints #capacity disparity
INT-10-igo	Team leader - IGO	Europe	N/A	N/A	#siloed #lack of awareness #resource constraints #lack of monitoring
INT-11-igo	Officer - IGO	Sub-Saharan Africa	N/A	N/A	#lack of awareness #integration gap #lack of monitoring
INT-12-igo	Climate Specialist - IGO	Sub-Saharan Africa	N/A	N/A	#lack of awareness #siloed
INT-13-ngo	Program and policy director - NGO	Europe	N/A	N/A	#low recognition #resource constraints #political framing
INT-14-ngo	Research and Program officer - NGO	Asia	N/A	N/A	#national integration barrier
INT-15-ngo	Research and Program officer - NGO	Europe	N/A	N/A	#lack of awareness #lack of support #too broad
INT-16-ngo	Deputy CEO-NGO	Europe	N/A	N/A	#siloed #lack of monitoring & accountability #lack of investment #resource constrains
INT-17-ngo	Executive Director - NGO	Middle East, North Africa, and Grater Arabia	N/A	N/A	#collaboration with the government #low awareness
INT-18-ngo	Researcher - YOUNGO	Asia	N/A	N/A	#funding stability #low prioritization

## 6 Reflections

This analysis of ACE has highlighted the complexities, challenges, and opportunities inherent in the process. Notably, each country's approach to ACE is shaped by its unique challenges and priorities, reinforcing that climate action requires tailored, context-specific strategies rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. However, the absence of standardized benchmarks raises concerns about accountability and the ability to measure progress effectively. Without common indicators for tracking efforts across different contexts, it becomes challenging to compare initiatives and only identifying best practices is not enough.

The implementation of ACE presents an opportunity to foster stronger collaboration across different actors and across the government, yet in practice, coordination between ministries, NFPs, and NSAs remains fragmented. While governments lead ACE-related initiatives, NSAs independently carry out grassroots campaigns, educational programs, and advocacy efforts. These parallel efforts, though valuable, could be more impactful if systematically integrated. NFPs play a crucial role in balancing international negotiations and domestic implementation, but their capacity to do so is often stretched thin. The UNFCCC Secretariat has made efforts to engage diverse stakeholders at the global level and international discussion spaces, yet translating this collaboration to the national level remains a difficult task. International platforms such as ACE Dialogues create valuable spaces for participation, but the challenge lies in ensuring that these discussions lead to coordinated, on-the-ground action.

ACE's evolving role as a tool for systemic change is also interesting. The motivations behind ACE engagement are shifting from mere awareness-raising to empowering marginalized voices and driving governance transformation. The participatory nature of ACE negotiations at COPs and SBs, with observer involvement in all spaces, marks a step forward in inclusivity. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that this level of engagement is consistent across all climate processes.

# 7 Recommendations

To enhance the implementation and relevance of ACE, it is crucial to strengthen its intersection with other key agenda items beyond the obvious cross-cutting themes like gender and capacity building. A deeper integration of ACE with just transition, community response measures, mitigation work programs, and technology development and transfer can create synergies that enhance both ACE's impact and its visibility within climate negotiations. One potential avenue is aligning ACE indicators with those used in other agenda items, ensuring that ACE activities, support broader climate goals. ACE can be used as a tool to facilitate systemic climate action strategically across different workstreams, making it a more integral part of implementation efforts under the UNFCCC framework.

To maximize the impact of ACE, it can be considered to move away from treating it as a standalone issue and instead fully mainstream it into all climate discussions at international, regional, and national levels. ACE is present in nearly every aspect of climate action, whether through public participation, training, access to information, or dialogue, yet it often remains side-lined. A key challenge is securing buy-in from stakeholders, ensuring that ACE is recognized as an integral component of climate policies rather than an isolated initiative. To prevent duplication of efforts and strengthen capacity-building, there should be a strong prioritization of collaboration and networking. Instead of fragmented, individual projects, ACE initiatives could be designed to foster collective learning and shared expertise to disseminate knowledge and skills.

A key barrier to effective ACE implementation is the communication gap between civil society organizations and national ACE focal points. Many focal points are either unaware of the organizations conducting ACE-related activities or focus primarily on governmental work, despite the fact that ACE cannot be implemented solely through government initiatives. Strengthening engagement between national focal points and the civic sector is essential for more inclusive and effective ACE action. While attending COPs and SBs helps civil society organizations stay informed about ACE developments at the multilateral level, this process is costly and not sustainable for all. Ensuring meaningful participation in global climate dialogues is essential but challenging. Simply attending these events does not guarantee influence or impact. To strengthen participation, there must be structured platforms at the national level that facilitate genuine engagement between governments, civil society, and grassroots organizations. It is crucial to move beyond symbolic involvement and create spaces where diverse stakeholders can collaborate effectively on climate action. National focal points should actively engage with and recognize more the work being done on the local level by different organizations in order to bridge this gap. This could be done by establishing formal mechanisms for collaboration, reporting, and information-sharing to ensure that ACE efforts are better coordinated at both national and international levels.

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