

RIFS-Blogpost

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Unequal Voices in international Climate governance: Who matters most?]



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The World Climate Change Conference, or COP29, was held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2024.

Climate change affects us all, but not equally. So how can, or should, inequality be reflected in participation structures at the international level of climate governance? The United Nations

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has, over time, given special recognitions and platforms to certain highly affected civil society constituencies. I therefore reflect on the theoretical underpinnings for these efforts, and why it's been crucial for maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Based on my recent article: [‘Recognising Differentiated Affectedness Within a Global Demos: Promoting the Democratic Legitimacy of the UNFCCC’](#), which can be viewed open access [here](#).

1.1 Representation and the struggle to be heard

Climate change is legally recognised at the international level to be a ‘common concern of humankind’. However, certain geographical zones are more at risk of severe impacts, as well as certain social groups. The IPCC recognises that, for indigenous communities, women, elderly people, disabled people and those with health concerns, displaced people, those living in poverty, other historically marginalised groups, or those working in specific sectors, the stakes of climate governance are often much higher.

But there is visible discontent among communities who feel their interests are being routinely disregarded by their political representatives and governments. The Fridays for Future strikes, farmer demonstrations in Europe, as well as recent waves of indigenous-led, youth-led, and other litigations led by vulnerable groups (see the *Klimaseniorinnen v. Switzerland* case) are motivated by strong feelings of disenfranchisement. These movements raise questions about how highly affected groups are represented in key decision-making processes in the first place.

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1.2 Affected groups in the UNFCCC: emerging opportunities

The UNFCCC is a state-driven process, but over the years has increasingly engaged observer NGOs. This is motivated by demands not only for knowledge input, but to fill perceived gaps in democratic legitimacy, cut through political divisions at the state level, and promote values of openness, inclusivity and an ‘all hands on deck’ mindset.

Initially, observers were grouped into two categories - those affiliated with business or those representing environmental concerns. But gradually, as a result of advocacy efforts and an understanding that the environmental NGOs may not adequately represent specific interests, recognised constituency groups have been expanded to include indigenous peoples’ organizations, trade union NGOs, women and gender NGOs, children and youth NGOs, and NGOs representing agriculture and farmers. These constituencies benefit from certain participation guarantees, such as speaking opportunities at meetings.

On top of this, some groups have gained additional institutional spaces within which they are able to highlight and advocate for their particular interests. For example, the ‘Gender and Climate’ agenda item is targeted specifically at gender issues, and the work program for agriculture and food security has heightened relevance for farmers. Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, a Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) was established as a mechanism for ‘integrating traditional, indigenous, and local knowledge systems into the UNFCCC process’. In 2023, the role of Presidency Youth Climate Champion was also created for a young representative to facilitate meaningful youth engagement.

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1.3 Recognising inequality and its challenges

These developments are largely seen as positive for the democratic legitimacy of the UNFCCC. But could it also challenge some deep-seated ideas about democracy, and is it possible to operationalise recognition of inequality in participation structures a fair way?

Widely accepted democratic theory tends to include reliance on two key principles. The all-affected principle means that anyone potentially affected by a decision-making process should be entitled to participate. And the principle of democratic equality means that every person who is part of that affected community should be given equal democratic rights.

For climate change, the implications are that everyone in the world should be entitled to representation in the UNFCCC, but no one should be prioritised over another. However, this does not sit well with the reality that many groups have higher stakes. Giving priority to those more highly affected might intuitively feel correct. But it's something that is difficult operationalise for reasons that come sharply into focus when applied to the climate problem.

The most significant challenge is that communities may be affected in all sorts of interconnected ways, whether physically, economically, socially, or culturally. Although turning to scientific criteria might be tempting for measuring and comparing these, purely objective approaches fall severely short when it comes to assigning value to impacts that affect group identity, such as loss of cultural heritage or indigenous land. Identifying affectedness is, in many of its dimensions, a self-constructed and deeply political exercise.

Moreover, amidst practical constraints at the global level, giving heightened visibility to some groups might come at the cost of

pushing others to the margins. Those with special health concerns, the elderly, migrants, refugees, other displaced people, those living in poverty, or in informal settlements, are just some examples of other groups who don't have their own recognised constituencies within the UNFCCC.

Other challenges include how to cater for shifting levels of affectedness over time, and how to square the participation of affected groups with the legitimate need to give due regard to participants with expert knowledge and technical competence.

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1.4 Flexible approaches safeguard legitimacy

There is no perfect science to answering these questions. But the nature of democratic ideals is that their precise implementation will always remain aspirational. We can only strive to uphold democratic values to the best extent possible, which will have positive implications for legitimacy. Reflecting different degrees of affectedness in participation structures is a value, therefore, that can be strived towards and constantly refined; not through static rules, but through deliberative, pragmatic and iterative processes, which integrate bottom-up advocacy and scientific input.

This is arguably what we have seen happen within the UNFCCC as its participatory landscape has evolved. It's broad openness to observers, in recognition of the universal concern of climate change, has allowed different affected groups to enter the space and make successful claims for elevated participation opportunities using their own testimonies and supported by scientific evidence. The UNFCCC should continue to remain open and adaptable in this way, to safeguard its democratic legitimacy.



