

Building climate diplomacy back better

Imagining the UNFCCC meetings of tomorrow

Summary for policy-makers October 2021

Could the future of our planet be decided on Zoom? When the climate talks came to a standstill in 2020, forcing diplomacy to move online, a new question soon arose: Could a digital transition serve as a “positive disruption”, a catalyst to transform the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process for the better?

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, few would have seriously considered virtual talks – but many had called for major reforms, pointing to the power imbalances and lack of trust that have long hindered progress. The carbon footprint of the climate conferences has also been a long-standing concern.

Over several months in 2021, the Stockholm Environment Institute examined how UNFCCC activities could be moved online in ways that increase their effectiveness, inclusiveness and transparency – and what problems might arise with such a transition. The research team engaged with climate negotiators, civil society, media, UN staff and digital and legal experts, identifying key barriers, opportunities and essential pre-conditions.

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[Building climate diplomacy back better: imagining the UNFCCC meetings of tomorrow](#)

Key insights

- **There is broad support for moving at least some UNFCCC activities online, and experience across the UN has shown far more can be done digitally than was believed 18 months ago. However, there is no clear champion for a digital transition, and calls for a return to fully in-person talks are gaining ground.**
 - **The greatest obstacle to a digital transition is the pervasive lack of trust among Parties, combined with legitimate concerns that moving online could reinforce structural inequities within the UNFCCC. Some who stand to gain from delaying the process may also raise objections for tactical reasons. In some ways, the fierce debate about a digital transition is a proxy conflict for long-held issues related to trust and power.**
 - **Visionary leadership is required, with the imagination to design a process that works. The UNFCCC is not the only process considering how online tools can be used to modernise and improve diplomacy. UN-wide coordination as well as guidance and leadership from the Secretary-General himself are thus crucial. Within the UNFCCC, the Presidency, Bureau and Secretariat are well positioned to take the lead.**
 - **A digital transition needs to be carefully designed and managed to ensure transparency and inclusion. It should not replicate the established UNFCCC process online, but examine how digital tools can be used to improve it. This offers an opportunity to rethink practices, such as the huddle and late-night marathons, that some consider opaque, outdated and fundamentally unjust.**
 - **Moving activities online will involve trade-offs that need to be explicitly addressed. For instance, an online meeting could be effective with a full agenda, but limited participants, or tackle a narrower agenda with broader participation.**
 - **Extra effort is needed to ensure accountability when activities go online. Virtual meetings can be more difficult for journalists to cover and could result in fewer voices being included in media coverage. There is also concern among NGOs that an online process could be exploited to restrict access, reduce transparency and limit watchdog, advocacy and advisory activities.**
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Recommendations

Sweden, the EU or any other interested Party could propose a taskforce to make recommendations on the format of future UNFCCC sessions. This would be done under the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) agenda item “Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings”. Chaired by the SBI chair and supported by the UNFCCC Secretariat, the taskforce should include representatives of all five UN regional groups and of observer constituencies.

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Those proposing the taskforce could do so jointly with Egypt, the expected host and President of COP27 and host of the African Hub during the online subsidiary body (SB) sessions in May–June 2021. Egypt holds considerable political capital among non-Annex-I Parties and showed strong leadership as COP President of the Convention on Biological Diversity in moving its 2021 SB sessions online.

As part of the taskforce's mandate or separately, Sweden or another Party should initiate and support independent in-depth analysis of concerns about the inadequacy of the UNFCCC process to advance ambitious climate action.

All UNFCCC Party groups could explore opportunities to strengthen coordination before and during online sessions and meetings. The African Hub, hosted by Egypt during the 2021 SB sessions, is an example of creative thinking that improved African Parties' coordination and negotiation capacity.

Annex-I Parties should make an active effort to better understand and address long-standing grievances and concerns of non-Annex-I Parties, including those that stem from non-delivery on past commitments. The EU, possibly jointly with the Group of 77 and China, could initiate an open-ended dialogue among Annex-I and non-Annex-I Parties.

The Secretariat of the UNFCCC could initiate a UN-wide effort to modernise multilateral diplomacy, exploring technical, procedural and other means to ensure sessions are fit for purpose and cost-efficient. It could include streamlining agendas and meeting schedules, clarifying the legal status and requirements of online decision-making, and improving the online platform.

For transparency and inclusiveness, it is important to provide spaces for meaningful interaction among observers, media representatives and Party delegates. The UNFCCC Secretariat, in collaboration with the wider UN system and the private sector, could also find ways to strengthen online infrastructure in specific locations, and build capacity among Party delegates and observers with little online experience.

To overcome the limitations of online processes, civil society organisations could intensify their online presence to convey their messages, and shift more of their focus to domestic climate policy. Media representatives could expand their focus beyond the COP sessions to the work done throughout the year.

Conclusions

The debate over moving parts of the climate negotiations online coincides with the UNFCCC's shift from forging a global agreement to national-level implementation. The timing presents a unique opportunity to reimagine and transform the UNFCCC process to make it more inclusive, transparent and effective. Two points are clear:

- Moving online is not merely a technical and political task; it is also a social and cognitive process. This means that the transition and its outcomes need to be co-created by and with all relevant actors. Change may need to be incremental, as shifting mindsets takes time, and insights will emerge from experience.
 - Building climate diplomacy back better will require creative leadership and initiative to set priorities, address entrenched and emerging inequalities, and overcome reluctance to change. The critical push may need to come from the UN system at large. Done well, the online transition could pave the way for a deeper transformation that strengthens global climate governance.
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