

NEGOTIATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN CRISIS

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17. Inside Out COPs: Turning Climate Negotiations Upside Down

*Shahrin Mannan, Saleemul Huq and
Mizan R. Khan*

By now it is known that COP25, the latest UNFCCC conference of the parties (COP) and the longest in history, could not achieve its intended outcomes, as negotiators failed to agree on the core issues, thus pushing further away the implementation of the Paris Agreement. COPs that overrun, since it is now a standard practice to drag negotiations into overtime, appear an extremely inefficient process, which is not helped by the arcane language of the adopted texts. We argue that it is time to rethink the entire process and propose the concept of 'inside out COPs'. This proposal affirms that actions on the ground to implement the Agreement should be given greater prominence than political negotiations agreeing to a patchwork of compromises over its rulebook for implementation. The many actors, including civil society, private companies, cities, universities, indigenous communities, youth and others pressing for action, should be put at centre-stage, which will allow for space to deliver results on the ground, as opposed to fetishising the skilful weaving of texts run through with constructed ambiguities.

COP Negotiations: A History of Inequitable and Inefficient Process

The climate change negotiations during the UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COPs) portray the underlying inequalities between industrialised and developing nations (Rennkamp 2020). One aspect of such inequality is the overrun of COPs beyond the schedule. COPs that overrun, since it is now a standard practice to drag negotiations into overtime, appear inefficient and unfair to the delegates of vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh, who have to return home after the official, prearranged timescale is over (Huq 2019). Invariably, the decisions made in the extra time are not in favour of vulnerable countries.

Figure 21 depicts the top 6 COP negotiations which were stretched beyond the schedule. COP25, the latest conference of the parties and the longest in history, could not achieve the intended outcomes with the negotiators failing to agree on the core issues, thus pushing further away the implementation of the Paris Agreement (Huq 2020).

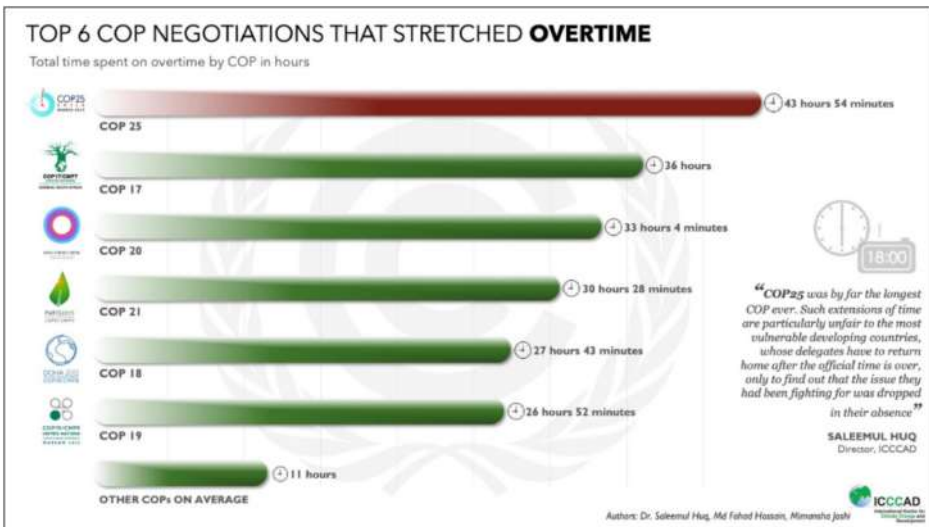


Fig. 21. Top 6 Negotiations That Stretched Overtime. Image by Saleemul Huq, Fahad Hossain and Mimansha Joshi (2019), Dhaka, Bangladesh. ©ICCCAD, CCBY 4.0.

Despite having plenty of time to reach an agreement over the course of two weeks, the COP often runs into overtime in order to reach a result, depriving the vulnerable developing countries from participating (Huq

2020). While negotiators continue mulling over texts and punctuation and arguing over agenda disputes (as detailed for COP21 by Sullivan Chapter 3, this volume), local communities are left to suffer. There is evidence that this is a deliberate tactic of the developed countries to water down agreements by getting rid of vulnerable country delegates from the negotiating process (Vihma 2014). The rhetorical facade of hope from the rich and powerful emitting nations to achieve the targets of the COP21 Paris Agreement has been replaced by this blatant game played on behalf of fossil fuel companies (Huq 2019).

Global Climate Agenda is Transforming and UNFCCC Negotiations Should Follow

The lack of progress in negotiations in recent years, and the failure to obtain a universal agreement on emission targets, have made the UNFCCC negotiation process questionable (Mfitumukiza et al. 2020). The recent failure of COP25 to allow the Warsaw International Mechanism on loss and damage to have an implementation and financing arm has made the vulnerable countries lose all hope (Mfitumukiza et al. 2020).

The current top-down approach of the UNFCCC negotiation process only deals with state actors, prioritising national demands over local needs questioning the efficacy of the process. But the potential of non-state actors (civil society organisations, communities, cities, businesses) to take on-the-ground climate actions is really high (Biasillo 2019).

Non-State Actors Transforming the Climate Agenda

While the negotiators continue to argue over agenda disputes, global greenhouse gas emissions have increased rapidly, making local communities more vulnerable (Huq 2020). But despite institutional evasion and government inaction, local climate actions are taking place around the world (Thew et al. 2020). Breaking from the popular notion of them as vulnerable victims to climate change-induced disasters, grassroot communities, together with local government and civil society organizations, are demonstrating locally-led adaptation measures (also see Lendelvo et al. and Sandover, this volume).

Researchers, academics and non-government organisations are also backing such initiatives by co-creating ground-level data and publishing the results.

While the global negotiations continue arguing over connotation and punctuation, local communities are addressing climate risks through collective actions (Mfitumukiza et al. 2020). Given the insufficient action by major emitting countries to combat climate change, youth movements have also intensified over the past year (Moosmann et al. 2020). Inspired by Greta Thunberg, young people around the world are engaging in school strikes drawing attention to the climate emergency and demanding justice and rapid political action. The ‘Fridays for Future’ movement, initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018, brought thousands of students to the streets every Friday to demand intergenerational climate change justice. ‘Extinction Rebellion’ has also made a mark as an attempt to halt mass extinction and minimise the risk of social collapse (Moosmann et al. 2020)—as also documented in the chapters by North, Paterson and Gardham, this volume.

This community of practice, including grassroot organisations, youth networks, indigenous groups, researchers, civil society and NGOs—sharing a common concern, and the passion to work on the same set of problems and enhance their knowledge and expertise by interacting with each other—is promising in terms of a “whole of society approach” towards solving the climate crisis (Iyalomhe et al. 2013).

Given the increasing evidence of climate-related stresses, the current negotiation process must be rectified. In the face of successful implementation of community-led climate actions and movements carried out by different groups, there is a need for a paradigm shift in the UNFCCC negotiation process from top-down and state-centric to a bottom-up, people-centric approach.

Reimagining COPs: From a Conference of Parties towards a Community of Practice

To increase the efficiency of the UN climate negotiations, it is time to reimagine the entire process and come up with alternative ways such big events are run. One way to do so is to introduce the concept of ‘inside out COPs’, which calls for giving greater prominence to the

climate actions taken on the ground than via the political negotiations. In these 'Action COPs' as opposed to the 'Negotiators' COPs', actors such as civil society, indigenous communities, private companies, cities and universities who are reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as building climate resilience will take centre-stage, leaving the government negotiators on the periphery (Mfitumukiza et al. 2020). Instead of skilfully weaving compromises, the action COPs will demonstrate results on the ground.

Over the course of two weeks of a COP, only around 5,000 technical government officials conduct the negotiations, later joined by the ministers. At the same time, thousands of people from different backgrounds attend different adjacent events taking place both inside and outside the COP venue (Wei 2017). From COP23 the world has started witnessing how the green zone, which features on-the-ground action, brings more energy than the closed-door blue zone where government negotiations take place (Huq 2020). These events provide opportunities to both practitioners sharing experiential knowledge, and researchers to tailor research according to local needs (Corcoran 2020).

COP26: A Pilot Action COP?

While the global climate change discourse cannot bypass the government negotiation process, it is also important to start piloting the potential of alternatives. The COP26 to be held in Glasgow in November 2021 provides the perfect opportunity to host a parallel 'Action COP' (COVID-19 constraints notwithstanding). The 'Negotiators' COP' can be hosted by the British government while the 'Action COP' can be held elsewhere in Glasgow by the Scottish government. The aim of the action COP will be to bring together the communities of practice and facilitate peer learning.

In order to avoid repeating the mistakes of COP25, the organisers of the UK COP26 should confirm ahead of the event that the negotiations will finish on time, and that the remaining agenda will be dealt with at COP27. If overnight negotiations are required, these should be conducted in the middle of the week, rather than at (or beyond) the end of the official schedule.

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