

Achieving a More Effective UNFCCC Process

Discussion Paper

July 29, 2025 21:58:07 | Kaveh Guilanpour

As the current negotiations phase of the climate regime is largely complete following full operationalization of the Paris Agreement, there is growing pressure for the UNFCCC to evolve so as to more effectively drive implementation and enhanced international cooperation. This paper sets out how that might be done.



SUMMARY

The 30th Conference of Parties (**COP30**) in Belém marks a critical turning point for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (**UNFCCC**), as it will be the first COP held after a full turn of the Paris Agreement’s ambition cycle, following the completion of first global stocktake as well as the submission of biennial transparency reports and new nationally determined contributions (**NDC**).

As global temperatures continue to rise and the Paris Agreement’s 1.5 degrees Celsius goal becomes more difficult to achieve, the UNFCCC process could benefit from:

- embracing a continued role for multilateral negotiations at the core of the process
- using the normative power of the UNFCCC strategically and sparingly and more effectively and efficiently
- measuring progress predominantly by reference to the impact of implemented national level policies
- using and improving existing processes created by the Paris Agreement, rather than creating new ones
- focusing as much on enhancing international cooperation to deliver implementation as on increasing formal ambition
- moving toward a non-negotiated common understanding of what the global equilibrium point of net-zero emissions in 2050 would look like
- a thorough and honest analysis of the value add of the UNFCCC process
- celebrating the successes that the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC process have delivered.

For COP30 to succeed, it must: (i) deliver on mandated negotiated items; and (ii) effectively respond to what is likely to be an insufficient collective level of ambition of submitted NDCs, including through better alignment of the action agenda to deliver on what has already been agreed by Parties. COP30 could also usefully celebrate the action of Parties thus far to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, including through the facilitative multilateral consideration of progress (**FMCP**).

The COP30 Presidency’s fourth letter,¹ which lays out a vision for an action agenda that is aligned with the outcomes of the first global stocktake, exemplifies a shift toward COPs focusing on enhancing international cooperation and implementation as much as they do on increasing formal ambition. If implemented, this would mark the most significant evolution of the UNFCCC process since the Paris Agreement was adopted.

Questions for consideration

- What does the UNFCCC process need to deliver—politically, and procedurally—to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement?
- What does implementation mean in the context of the UNFCCC? How could the UNFCCC process evolve so as to add value and be more effective in the context of a greater focus on implementation?
- Should the UNFCCC evolve into a process that: enables long-term thinking, collaboration, and open dialogue; is built on mutual respect; and provides a safe, constructive working atmosphere? What would it take to make this happen?
- What could be the role of COP30 and successive COPs to accelerate implementation?

Inflection Point

1. It is a cliché, but nevertheless true, that every successive COP is the most important one to date. But there is a particular resonance when this is said about COP30 in Belém, which will:
 - be the first COP with the full Paris Agreement (**PA**) architecture and implementing guidance in place, marking the end of a significant phase of negotiations under the UNFCCC process
 - be the first COP following a full turn of the Paris Agreement's ambition cycle, namely the first global stocktake informing a new round of NDCs, as well as the submission of biennial transparency reports (**BTRs**)
 - be the first COP after Parties agreed the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate finance.
2. In other words, the UNFCCC process is at an inflection point. Following years of negotiations that led to its adoption, and subsequently the guidance needed to implement it, the Paris Agreement is now fully operational.
3. This begs the question as to what the role of the UNFCCC process could and should be going forward.

Implementation in the context of the Paris Agreement

4. It is a common refrain that the climate negotiations are now largely over, and that the UNFCCC process should focus on implementation.
5. From a narrow perspective implementation would mean that Parties should deliver against their obligations and commitments under the PA and the Convention.
6. Such a focus on implementation is clearly needed given that most Parties have failed to comply with the requirement to deliver new and more ambitious nationally determined contributions (**NDCs**) by February 10, 2025, and a large number did not come forward with BTRs by December 31, 2024. The expectation now is that all Parties will submit new NDCs by September 2025, when the UN Secretary General is anticipated to host a summit in New York for that purpose.
7. At the same time, it is not clear that this narrow focus alone is what is meant when there are demands for 'implementation.' In a context where: emissions continue to rise; the world will overshoot the 1.5 degrees C temperature limit; and climate impacts are increasingly frequent and severe, cries for implementation largely emanate from a demand for urgent, positive, and visible action.

8. And yet the UNFCCC is not set up for implementation in the wider sense. Fundamentally it is a treaty body with a multilateral process at its core (to which in recent years has been attached an energetic, but largely incoherent and unaccountable, action agenda). A growing mismatch between expectations of the PA and what it was originally designed to do—periodically take stock of progress towards achieving its long-term goals; inform setting of new targets; and report on progress towards meeting targets—could increasingly call into question its credibility and the faith that people have in it and the UNFCCC process.
9. Beyond making good on commitments made under the Paris Agreement, implementation in the context of the UNFCCC could involve:
 - using its norm-setting function to send specific signals to Parties and non-Party stakeholders (**NPS**) in order to facilitate implementation in the ‘real world’. i.e. to effectively ‘hand-off’ UNFCCC outcomes to actors that are best placed to implement. (Recent examples include: (i) calls for reform of the multilateral development banks)
 - leveraging an action agenda—to which the fourth letter of the incoming COP30 Presidency (the **4th letter**) gives a clearer role and seeks to organize²—that is designed to support delivering the goals of the PA and the outcomes of the global stocktake (**GST**) at and beyond COP30.

Evolution not revolution

10. In the aftermath of every COP, there are calls to reform the UNFCCC—and the process could be improved. But we should be aiming for an evolution, not a revolution. There are two reasons for this.
11. Firstly, a revolution would almost certainly not result in something stronger than we already have. It is hard to imagine that it would be possible to adopt the PA in the current geopolitical and economic context, and for the same reason the conditions are not there for a radical overhaul of the UNFCCC process, which requires consensus.
12. Secondly, the PA is working, albeit not fast enough. There is a lot about the current process that is good and should not be lost:
 - transmitting normative signals—for example decisions since COP21 have: mainstreamed the 1.5 degrees C limit; clarified the aim for net-zero global emissions by 2050; set global sectoral targets such as tripling renewable energy by 2030, transitioning away from fossil fuels and putting in place early warning systems for all by 2027; and agreed to a new collective quantified goal on climate finance
 - a unique ability to convene world leaders in significant numbers around the issue of climate change
 - facilitating the emergence of a burgeoning action agenda, including as a result of the work of the high-level climate champions (**HLCs**), that attracts NPS to COPs in growing numbers.

The challenges

13. The biggest barriers to the effective functioning of the UNFCCC and delivering on the promise of the PA are deficiencies in the underlying politics. No amount of tweaking of the UNFCCC process can make up for that. And yet there seems to be a tendency to try to compensate through the UNFCCC negotiations process for failures at the political level — the worse the external geopolitical conditions, the harder negotiators seem to try to find a way around them.
14. Beyond that, the UNFCCC has an engrained culture of confrontational zero-sum negotiating dynamics that has been built over the decades. This culture is not best suited to respond effectively to greater calls for implementation. More than that, ‘nature abhors a vacuum’ (i.e. empty spaces are unnatural and tend to be filled by surrounding matter). In

a relative post-negotiating setting, something positive needs to replace the diminished need for ‘big ticket’ negotiations in the UNFCCC process, or negotiators will fill the space by finding things to negotiate.

15. There is an apparent universal call from Parties that they should not seek to amend, renegotiate or backtrack from the Paris Agreement. Yet perceptions, justified or no, that others are attempting to do so breeds mistrust and undermines the system and serves as a barrier to evolution. Examples include: seeking normative decisions to push countries to update NDCs outside of the five-year cycle; focusing efforts on implementation only on parts of the decision on the outcome of the GST’s paragraph 28 on mitigation; turning the potentially collaborative spaces of the mitigation work programme into another de facto negotiating setting.
16. The years since the adoption of the Paris Agreement have seen a mainstreaming of the 1.5 degrees C temperature limit as the guiding star, and a refinement of the goal of net-zero emissions as something to be achieved globally by 2050. Yet there is no common vision of what that equilibrium will look like or that it will mean a positive future for all Parties. Unnuanced calls to work towards net-zero emissions by 2050 leave out important issues, such as: the reality that we will overshoot 1.5 degrees C; the need beyond net-zero equilibrium for negative emissions technologies to come back down to 1.5 degrees C; the fact that equilibrium will be achieved at different times and will look very different in different countries, including in the light of equity considerations. A blunt net zero 2050 approach in the climate negotiations generates resistance and will increasingly become a barrier, as low hanging fruit is harvested and difficult choices need to be made to respond to the latest science.
17. Unless the UNFCCC can work toward a future where every country can see a positive future for itself, Parties will continue to push back. This is a major problem in a consensus-based process—and there seems little prospect of the climate negotiations moving to a voting system any time soon, if ever.
18. In terms of the technical process, the biggest challenge to making the process more efficient and effective is the requirement for consensus, as seen most recently at SB62 in negotiations on arrangements for intergovernmental meetings (*AIM*). But those negotiations, which have been going for years, show just how hard even modest reforms to the formal UNFCCC process will be to achieve.

What could a fit for purpose UNFCCC process look like?

It is possible to imagine a future for a UNFCCC process that:

- accelerates progress towards achieving its goals, in line with the latest science of the IPCC, by: (i) peaking and declining emissions and rapid reductions in projected global temperature increase; (ii) transitioning to a climate resilient and safe future for all
- is clear on where it can add value and what is best left to external processes and fora, while maximizing synergies with them (e.g. the other Rio Conventions, the Sustainable Development Goals, and trade)
- when needed, delivers hard-fought but constructive and effective normative signals and political outcomes that effectively enhance ambition and facilitate implementation, as well as generating the necessary buy-in needed to deliver by bringing countries together
- visibly speaks to implementation and drives climate action in a way which is relatable to people around the world, responsive to their concerns and is increasingly seen as collaborative, problem solving, and relevant (and less confrontational, introspective and irrelevant; e.g. by using existing UNFCCC processes focused on highlighting examples of implementation such as those under the enhanced transparency framework)
- celebrates success and highlights economic opportunity, as well as pointing out what more needs to be done, and how to do it
- provides for and facilitates non-negotiated spaces and enhanced international cooperation, that then feed back into the process in a way that feels ‘safe’ to Parties, including through the formation of coalitions and peer-to-peer collaboration as well as sharing of challenges and good practice

- effectively draws on the power of NPS to enhance ambition and implementation by: (i) clearly aligning the work of the HLCs and the action agenda with delivering on the goals of the Paris Agreement, the outcomes of the GST as well as NDCs, NAPs and long-term low emission development strategies (**LT-LEDs**); (ii) creating the optimal conditions needed for the action agenda to support achieving the goals of the PA and the outcomes of the GST, through international norm and encouraging the development of credible national level policies that bring certainty as to the direction of travel
- adopts rules of procedures that are fit for purpose, including so as to minimize agenda fights at the start of sessions.

Achieving the vision

19. Delivering a more effective UNFCCC such as set out above could entail several components:

- Embrace a **continued role for multilateral negotiations at the core**—and recognize that this is what attracts world leaders and non-Parties to come to COPs—but work towards increasingly and intentionally contextualizing the negotiations in a wider ecosystem of climate action to which it is clearly linked. Don't place all expectations only on the negotiated outcomes.
- Use the normative power of the UNFCCC strategically and sparingly, and ensure that the political groundwork is done in advance** to support intended normative COP outcomes
 - COPs can be important political 'forcing events.' But success requires careful political preparation, and pushing Parties beyond their comfort zone can breed resentment and reduce the likelihood of implementation (e.g. lack of follow through on COP28 outcomes)
 - Resist the temptation to use the UNFCCC negotiating process to make up for failures at the political level, unless confident of success. Failed or highly divisive attempts to do so are damaging to the process and breed mistrust. (e.g. successive attempts since COP21 to force NDC updates through COP decisions, outside of the five-year cycle)
- Move to an approach where **progress is measured predominantly by the impact of implemented national level policies**, not NDCs on paper. In other words, move to a greater focus on implementing Article 4.2 PA.³
- Use existing processes created by the PA** and improve them, rather than creating new ones:
 - Respect the five-year ambition cycle of the PA. Rather than trying to force updates to NDCs outside of the cycle, focus on creating the political conditions for success within the cycle.
 - Engage constructively and proactively in the FMCP process and all aspects of the PA transparency regime.
- Make the norm setting function of the UNFCCC more effective and efficient**
 - Formally – for example, (i) through the arrangements for intergovernmental meetings (**AIM**) agenda;⁴ (ii) by effectively preparing the ground for and using planned reviews of implementing guidance (e.g. to strengthen the enhanced transparency framework)
 - Informally – through understandings reached among Parties at the political level; for example, Parties could informally agree to introduce no new agenda items. This requires clarity on what does and does not require consensus for change
 - Budget – in the context of the budgetary pressures on the UN and UNFCCC, scarce funds could be focused on core functions needed to implement the PA .
- Focus as much on enhancing international cooperation to deliver implementation** as on increasing formal ambition on paper through NDC target setting:
 - harness and align the power of action agenda to deliver on GST outcomes and NDCs, and further mainstream the work of the HLCs

- create a coherent focus for COPs aside from the negotiations
 - through leadership of front runners, build visible coalitions and peer-to-peer processes to generate a proactive and visible golden thread between GST outcomes and implementation (e.g. use of Article 7(2)(b) and Article 7(2)(c) UNFCCC)
 - build on the hook of the 4th incoming COP30 Presidency letter to achieve the above
- Work, in settings outside of the UNFCCC, to move towards a non-negotiated **common understanding of what the global equilibrium point of net-zero emissions in 2050 would look like** in different countries and regions, including through the lens of economic opportunity, avoided costs, just transitions, and the role of emerging technologies.
 - **Undertake a thorough and honest analysis of the value add of the UNFCCC process** and what is best left to others.
 - Do not overburden the UNFCCC with unrealistic expectations.
 - Leverage synergies with external processes to maximum effect.
 - **Celebrate the successes** that the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC process have delivered, in a narrative that is understandable to those outside the climate bubble. For instance, Parties can use existing transparency processes such as the FMCP presentations to drive narratives of impactful implementation.
 - Consider not ending COPs with the final negotiations plenary. e.g. save main announcements from the action agenda until the final day.

What could be the role of COP30 and successive COPs in evolving the UNFCCC?

20. COP30 must deliver on several mandates, including the global goal on adaptation (**GGA**) indicators. This is necessary but not sufficient for success.
21. To be successful COP30 will also need to say something about the collective level of ambition of submitted NDCs. But what should it say and in what form? There is no obvious place on the agenda. And are the geopolitical conditions there for a normative signal that would go beyond what we have already agreed at previous COPs?
22. The mismatch between expectations for COP30 and what the formal negotiations might be able to deliver could be used positively to create an opportunity to shift away from a focus on confrontational final plenary outcomes as the only test of success and progress.
23. In its 4th letter the incoming Presidency sets out an intention at COP30 to address three major challenges:
 - “(i) Aligning the Action Agenda with what we have already collectively agreed under successive UNFCCC COPs and the Paris Agreement;
 - (ii) Leveraging existing initiatives to accelerate and scale climate implementation; and
 - (iii) Driving transparency, monitoring and accountability of existing and new pledges and initiatives.”⁵
24. If implemented, this could mark a significant moment in the transformation of the UNFCCC process away from being dominated by negotiations to one that also focuses on enhancing international cooperation to implement promises made. As such it could represent the most significant evolution of the UNFCCC process since the Paris Agreement was adopted.

C2ES Resources

- [Re-invigorating the UN Climate Regime in the wider landscape of climate action](#), March 2023
- [The Paris Agreement: a moment for reflection](#), January 2025
- [Reforming the United Nations for the Future of the Global Climate Regime](#), May 2025
- [Increasing Efficiency in the UNFCCC Process](#), March 2025
- [Capitalizing On Transparency to Accelerate Climate Action](#), April 2025
- [Delivering on the Targets and Signals from the First Global Stocktake](#), October 2024

References

¹ André Aranha Correa do Lago, “Fourth Letter from the Presidency,” *COP30*, June 20, 2025, <https://cop30.br/en/brazilian-presidency/letters-from-the-presidency/fourth-letter-from-the-presidency>.

² do Lago, “Fourth Letter from the Presidency.”

³ UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Art. 4.2, December 12, 2015, T.I.A.S. No. 16-1104, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

⁴ *Increasing Efficiency in the UNFCCC Process, Including the Streamlining of the Agendas of the Governing and Subsidiary Bodies* (Washington, DC: Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, March 31, 2025), <http://c2es.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/C2ES-AIM-submission.pdf>.

⁵ do Lago, “Fourth Letter from the Presidency.”

