

Building climate diplomacy back better: imagining the UNFCCC meetings of tomorrow

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1. Introduction

Could the future of our planet be decided on Zoom? The feasibility of “online climate negotiations” was the issue the OnCliNe project initially set out to assess. However, experiences over the last 18 months illustrated that many of the diverse activities organised under the umbrella of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) could be held online, albeit with challenges. The real question was whether they could be held in ways that increase the effectiveness, inclusiveness and transparency of the UNFCCC process.

“I think the delay of the COP last year was actually a positive thing for the process. It has given us a chance to reset, and to really think about how we’re doing things, which we needed really, really badly.”

Advisor to vulnerable developing countries

“We need to design a process people didn’t know they needed.” This observation, coming from a technical expert at one of the project’s stakeholder roundtables, captures well the challenge for the UNFCCC process in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, few participants in, or observers to, the UNFCCC process would have likely claimed that designing an online UNFCCC process was desirable or necessary. But many would have argued for broader reform of the process, noting the current lack of trust and power imbalances. In many ways, our analysis finds that the fierce debate about whether to move more of the process online can be seen as a proxy conflict for these long-standing and diverging interests and perspectives.

This report reflects the sentiment of many stakeholders that there is an opportunity to harness the interruption and introspection that the pandemic imposed into a “positive disruption” of the process. If actions taken now can transcend the tendency to return to “business as usual” as soon as circumstances allow, and instead work towards a meaningful transformation of the climate talks, the UNFCCC process can be made more fit for purpose for tackling one of humanity’s greatest challenges. This will require creativity, courage, and active and decisive leadership.

OUR APPROACH: STAKEHOLDER-BASED ASSESSMENT

The project has engaged a select but diverse group of stakeholders, including negotiators, civil society, media, UN staff and digital and legal experts, many with a decade or more of relevant experience. Between February and June 2021, we gathered 195 survey responses (77 from a targeted audience and 118 from a publicly available survey), conducted 22 stakeholder interviews, did an analysis of public statements (including official statements, quotes and interviews given in the press, blogs and Twitter posts), and convened three roundtables (with civil society, digital experts and media representatives). We also regularly consulted with the project’s advisory group.

We took care to consult underrepresented and vulnerable groups, striking a balance between representatives from various geographical origins (including indigenous peoples), areas of interest, age and gender. The survey respondents were 52% female, 47% male and 1% non-binary. Collectively, they represent 59 nationalities. Their work focuses on all regions (Europe 17%, Africa 11%, Central and South America 10%, Asia 7%, Small Island Developing States 6%, North America 3%, the polar regions 1.5%, Australasia 0.5%). Over a third (36%) are affiliated with observer organisations, 29% with Parties, 15% with the UNFCCC Secretariat or other UN organisations, 3% with media outlets, 3% with intergovernmental organisations and 14% other/none stated. Participation in the project has been voluntary, and despite active attempts, we were unable to consult all Party groups. Participants are quoted in the report according to their stated preference: anonymously, identified by their affiliation or function, or with their full name and role. The analysis is supported by a literature review, the application of a theoretical framework, and a background report collating online experiences from 2020 from six leading multilateral processes.

Further information on the methodology and data underpinning this report can be found at www.sei.org/OnlineClimateNegotiations.

2. Reflections and insights

1. **Much more of the UNFCCC process can be undertaken online than was anticipated 18 months ago. Change is already underway.** Stakeholders emphasise that concerns with *negotiating* online may be less relevant to this new era of *implementation* and that this shift opens up the necessary diplomatic space to begin imagining a bigger transformation of the process. However, a combination of risk aversion and “proxy” concerns (on long-standing differences related to trust and power issues) could prevent more of the process from moving online or delay it. Meanwhile, calls for a return to an in-person process – in full and in perpetuity – are gaining ground.
2. **Under pressure from the climate emergency, there are winners and losers from slow progress in the UNFCCC process.** The “winners” – those who stand to gain the most from delays – may find it in their interest to deploy tactical objections to a digital transition of the UNFCCC process, as a way to stall the negotiations. However, the “losers” – those who stand to lose the most from delays, including the most vulnerable developing countries – are also likely to have legitimate concerns that a digital transition could disadvantage them further. Thus, though our analysis showed that many stakeholders see potential opportunities in a more online process, it is unclear who among the interest groups might actually champion an online agenda. Furthermore, there appears to be little appetite among Parties for investing political capital in harnessing the digital transition to push for wider reforms that would effectively address such objections and concerns.
3. **The UNFCCC is not the only process in which the opportunities and pitfalls of online multilateralism are being considered and the need to modernise diplomacy is recognised.** The extent and intensity of efforts made in the near term will determine whether these discussions become a “blip” in history or translate into a “positive disruption” of the process. UN-wide coordination and guidance are important, as is leadership from the Secretary-General himself. Rebuilding the trust many participants and observers have lost in the process will require an active demonstration of effort and intent – to begin to sow the seeds that could one day yield a genuine transformation of the process.
4. **The use of digital technologies is a means to an end, not an end in itself.** The task is not to adapt the climate negotiations so that they can work online, but to assess how digital tools can best support the specific needs of the negotiations, and those of the UNFCCC process as a whole. Stakeholders in the project’s technical roundtable emphasised that digital elements are only successful if they support a well-thought-out process in which activities have been designed, structured and ordered to create consensus in the most transparent and inclusive way possible, with trained and engaging facilitators. “Disruption should not be led by technology, but by the grievances in process and policy that need to be figured out before technology comes and fixes them,” argued one stakeholder.
5. **Change needs to be deliberate and well designed: A poorly managed digital transition may reinforce rather than reduce existing structural inequities within the UNFCCC process.** Rushing to reproduce or replicate all aspects of the established offline process would relegate the online format to remaining a pale copy of the in-person process, losing all the virtual format’s transformational potential. As one stakeholder said: “Technology should not replicate the real world, but engage a paradigm shift, rethinking how we interact in the first place.” There is an opportunity to rethink negotiation practices – even those that seem critical to success, such as the huddle and the late-night marathon sessions (used to force conclusions in the last run of a session). Some consider these practices opaque, outdated and fundamentally unjust. “One should not keep the huddle,” said a member of the project’s advisory group. Another noted: “I don’t think the huddle is a good way of making decisions ... it comes from a male-dominated world” (Artur Runge-Metzger, retired director, European Commission).

- 6. Visionary leadership is required, with the imagination to design a process that works.** “If Steve Jobs had designed what people wanted, he would have designed something very different from the iPhone; for the UNFCCC, we need to design what people did not know they wanted,” said one member of the project’s advisory group. The Presidency, Bureau and the Secretariat are well-positioned to take the lead in instigating a digital transition and wider optimisation of the UNFCCC process, despite fears from some that this might give them too much power. They could design the activities, set the right intentions and generate interaction and positive dynamics in ways that could mitigate or even transcend many of the concerns of an online process.
- 7. Moving activities online means making trade-offs – in comprehensiveness, effectiveness or inclusiveness.** Despite the strong sense of urgency, risk aversion translates into a wariness of moving in the “wrong” direction. Stakeholders suggested that an online meeting could be effective with a full agenda, but only a limited number of participants. Or it could follow a full agenda and engage all participants, but it might not be very effective. Those leading any form of digital transition should be aware of, and explicitly acknowledge, such trade-offs and seek to mitigate any adverse effects.
- 8. In an online process, extra effort is needed to ensure continued transparency and accountability to the public.** Journalists noted that in online meetings, it is more difficult for them to gather information, secure interviews and cover stories. This could lead to fewer voices being heard and coverage becoming less diverse and balanced. Likewise, there is concern among NGOs that an online process could be exploited to restrict access, reduce transparency and limit meaningful engagement, which would impede their watchdog, advocacy and advisory activities.
- 9. It is important to distinguish between the short term, the long term and the very long term.** As one stakeholder noted: “COP26 is too short-term for cultures to change.” Another said: “I would love that we could all move to virtual – [it could be possible] in the mid- to long term, but only once we’ve addressed all the issues of the digital divide.” Many things thought impossible only a year ago are now everyday parts of working life, but shifting mindsets takes time. People need to feel that a move online is a natural evolution of the process and not one that is imposed on them, recognising that incremental steps can still pave the way to transformation over time.

3. Recommendations

Considering these reflections and insights, and building on the analysis presented in the remainder of the report, we offer the following recommendations to various actors:

Sweden, the EU or any other interested Party could raise the issue of the format of future UNFCCC COP sessions and other meetings under the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) agenda item “Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings”. The UNFCCC process is transitioning from negotiating a global agreement and its modalities for implementation to advancing domestic action, strengthening international support and tracking collective progress. There is also a recognised need to reduce the carbon intensity of UNFCCC operations. In light of all this, Sweden, the EU or any other Party could propose the establishment of a taskforce to prepare recommendations on the format of future sessions and meetings for consideration by the SBI, based on lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chaired by the SBI chair and supported by the UNFCCC Secretariat, the taskforce would consist of representatives of all five UN regional groups and of observer constituencies. It would meet online or in conjunction with planned sessions.

The Party or Parties proposing the taskforce may wish to consider doing so jointly with Egypt. As the expected host and President of COP27, and as 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, in particular the African Group of Negotiators, the Like-Minded Group of Developing Countries and the Arab Group. Moreover, as the current COP President of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Egypt has demonstrated strong leadership in the decision to move its 2021 SB sessions online.

Either as part of the taskforce's mandate or as a separate activity, **Sweden or any other Party in a position to do so** is encouraged to initiate and support independent in-depth analysis of prevailing concerns about the inadequacy of the UNFCCC process to advance ambitious climate action. Unless these concerns, which predate the COVID-19 pandemic, are addressed, a change in the format of the UNFCCC process is unlikely to yield great benefits – beyond a possible reduction of the UN's carbon footprint.

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. In addition, to begin to restore the mutual trust necessary for an effective UNFCCC process regardless of the format, **Annex-I Parties** need to 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 demonstrate leadership by initiating an open-ended dialogue involving Annex-I and non-Annex-I Parties, aimed at creating a shared appreciation of the issues that are currently hindering progress and eroding trust within the UNFCCC process, as well as a pathway towards their resolution.

The Secretariat of the UNFCCC could be proactive in initiating a UN-wide effort to modernise multilateral diplomacy. This would provide opportunities to explore technical, procedural and other means of ensuring that UNFCCC sessions and meetings are fit for purpose and cost-efficient, with a reduced carbon footprint. It could also include streamlining agendas and meeting schedules, providing clarity on the legal status and requirements of online decision-making, and improving the online platform used for the SB sessions of May–June 2021. Such efforts should be based on an inventory of diverse user needs and technical opportunities, and incorporate lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, including those from other multilateral processes and UN conventions. In the spirit of transparency and inclusiveness, it will be important to provide spaces that enable more 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 consider facilitating and supporting the strengthening of online infrastructure in specific locations, and build capacity among Party delegates and observers with little online experience.

Irrespective of the format, the presence of **civil society organisations and media representatives** is critical to ensure the visibility and legitimacy of the UNFCCC process. A move online would limit their ability to interact spontaneously with negotiators and other key actors, and require them to change how they convey their messages. **Civil society organisations** could intensify their online presence, benefiting from practices and platforms in digital campaigning elsewhere. They could also shift part of their focus to domestic climate policy, reflecting the transition of the UNFCCC process from global negotiation to domestic implementation. **Media representatives** could expand their focus beyond the COP sessions to the work done throughout the year, which could have the added benefit of managing the public's expectations of negotiation outcomes. That said, it remains important for both civil society and media to have an annual "moment" when global climate policy is at the centre of the world's attention.

4. The wider context

A fit for purpose process?

Discussions about how to make the UNFCCC process more “fit for purpose” were underway even before the delays and disruptions caused by the pandemic. Perspectives on moving the UNFCCC process online are being influenced by – and cannot be separated from – stakeholders’ views on the process as it has been and the changing needs and nature of the process.

First, many stakeholders emphasised the need for systemic reform of the process. The desire for change influences how they assess the constraints and opportunities associated with moving it online. “I think the process is broken, and I am not alone in that,” argued an advisor to vulnerable developing countries – a sentiment echoed by many. Stakeholders point to the current climate of mistrust, power imbalances and polarisation that the process perpetuates, growing animosity between participants and observers, and insufficiently ambitious outcomes that fail to meet the scale of the climate challenge.

Stakeholders questioned the continued usefulness of negotiating prescripts such as “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” as well as the effectiveness of the COP: its ever-growing size, its cost and carbon footprint, whether two weeks of negotiations translate into timely enough progress, and the inequitable practices its design harbours. They pointed to the small number of delegates that an in-person process can accommodate. “It’s a small group, it’s a club basically,” said a former staff member of the UNFCCC Secretariat. They also pointed to the limits imposed by the way in which decisions are reached: “We’re at a stage in the life of this process where there is a massive crisis. And we don’t have a way to respond to this using our current modality of negotiation, which just enables baby steps forward based on universal consensus. It cannot transform, and so you have a mismatch,” said one stakeholder. Another, a member of the project’s advisory group, said: “Now is the time to question our practices and protocols.”

Second, the needs of the UNFCCC process are changing fundamentally as its focus shifts from negotiation to implementation. Many stakeholders stressed that this new phase requires prioritising different activities and functions. This, in turn, has a bearing on the extent to which they feel that moving the UNFCCC process online is feasible and/or desirable. While there are crucial issues yet to be agreed in the “rulebook” of the Paris Agreement, the focus will largely be on implementation (which takes place at a domestic rather than global level) and accountability (to deliver on the Paris Agreement) in the years ahead. Stakeholders emphasised that online modalities could be better suited to the requirements of new implementation functions than negotiating activities.

The UNFCCC during the pandemic

How has the experience of the past 18 months shifted the way stakeholders envision the UNFCCC process of the future? It is clear that perspectives on online climate negotiations are evolving. OnCliNe’s research findings suggest that acceptance of online technologies has grown over the course of the project, driven by increasing experience, confidence and comfort in working online. There is also a sense of urgency – that we cannot afford to wait. As one stakeholder reflected: “Initially I felt we can’t move this process online, but my opinion shifted; maybe there are some parts we can move” (Anju Sharma, consultant, Global Center for Adaptation). Another stakeholder (Tracy Bach, RINGO co-focal point and professor of law and public policy) said: “Even people my age have adopted this. I feel like we are in the same room now.”

The SB sessions in May–June 2021 were a significant test of the acceptance and feasibility of online climate negotiations. One could tentatively grade them a “pass, but with room for improvement”. On the one hand, they demonstrated that significant elements of the traditionally in-person intersessionals *could* be held online – even if they stopped short of reaching decisions. Attendance was higher than an in-person format would support – which could be read as a signal of increased inclusiveness. The African Group of Negotiators innovated by gathering in person

“After one year of working this way, we’ve got better at working remotely; I think in general the groups have worked a lot better, and I do include the African group in that; people have got better in terms of connecting and just adapting our work.”

African civil society stakeholder

in an “African Hub” in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, which provided participants with physical spaces and technical and logistical support. The initiative offered a balanced solution to the digital gap experienced by many African countries, while keeping infection risk and environmental impact relatively low compared with a traditional meeting. Many see the use of such regional hubs as a way forward. Others referenced the “levelling of the playing field” catalysed by the relative inability of all delegations to coordinate. As one stakeholder in the project’s advisory group stated: “Negotiators seem to have adapted to online modalities already during the June SB. For the future, we should be building on what we have achieved and made accepted over the pandemic and the SB.”

On the other hand, the talks were met with fierce critiques, and there were clearly a number of challenges. “Connectivity problems compounded and complicated the trust deficits that exist,” said Quamrul Chowdhury, climate negotiator from Bangladesh. Observers vented frustration over what they perceived to be the lack of inclusion of their voice in the process, both in plenaries and in consultations. They also argued that Parties (perceiving or fearing a loss of confidentiality and/or enhanced scrutiny) used the online modalities as justifications to close the doors of these digital sessions, restricting their access and reducing transparency. “It’s a nightmare for any kind of engagement... and especially for observers, who were shut out of the transparency discussion,” stated Tasneem Essop, executive director of Climate Action Network–International. The process was also slower than in person. This was a result, stakeholders noted, of the reduced mental capacity to work for long periods online, the instability of internet connections (which appeared to affect both developed and developing countries) and the need for a rolling schedule (shifting to a different time zone each week was deemed “painful for all, but perceived as fair” while also “de facto encouraging silos and imbalance”). Moreover, without formal decisions, tangible progress is hard to measure: “Quite well handled, but how far can it really be converted to something that produces results?” opined one stakeholder.

Adoption of digital multilateralism practices beyond the UNFCCC

The UNFCCC process was not the only one affected by the consequences of the pandemic. All intergovernmental organisations and multilateral processes have had to adopt virtual working modalities since March 2020, with various degrees of success and acceptance. Comparing the practices and experiences of the UNFCCC with two other processes that are global in scope, take legally binding actions and have ongoing negotiations – the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA) – offers interesting insights on points of synergy and divergence in the adoption of digital multilateralism.

The Convention on Biological Diversity

The pandemic delayed the long-awaited post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework that should have been adopted at the 15th session of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD in 2020. Under pressure to deliver on this crucial text, most events were held online after being initially rescheduled during the pandemic’s first wave. The CBD has gone further than the UNFCCC in shifting its activities online, even taking some decisions remotely – in stark contrast to climate negotiators’ preferences. The Egyptian Presidency demonstrated strong leadership in embracing innovative ways of working, supported by higher levels of acceptance by Parties to the CBD than in the UNFCCC. The CBD SBs faced criticism for holding their plenaries in a single time zone, which penalised the Asia–Pacific region, and online engagement halted the speed and fluidity of the talks. The absence of “small talk” around negotiation rooms, and the incompatibility of traditional negotiation tactics with online participation, were cited as reasons for limited progress. Contact groups laid the groundwork for upcoming in-person negotiations but did not attempt to reach consensus on controversial topics.

The UN General Assembly

The UNGA has appeared much more averse to digital multilateralism. In March 2020, Nigeria – 74th President of the General Assembly – proposed that in the absence of in-person meetings, decisions be taken by assuming silence to mean consent – known as the silence procedure. However, Turkey, which has presided over the 75th session of the General Assembly, has

insisted on hosting physical meetings. At the in-person opening plenary meeting of the 75th session in September 2020, the President remarked: “In our business of diplomacy, there is no substitute to meeting counterparts face-to-face, to build long-term understanding of each other’s positions and forge compromise.” The high-level general debate was then also held in person, employing physical distancing measures and restricting access (allowing only one person per delegation in the General Assembly Hall, for instance), as well as broadcast online. It included pre-recorded statements and declarations from world leaders. Other activities of the UNGA incorporated more virtual elements: for instance, the High-level Political Forum was fully held online, while the Summit on Biodiversity adopted a hybrid format.

The road ahead

All multilateral processes appear to have slowed during the pandemic, and the lack of informal discussions on the sidelines of formal processes has been a recurring concern when considering digital alternatives. Speculation that virtual attendance may be maintained for some meetings appears to have some grounding: For instance, at the closing plenary of the June 2021 SBs, UNFCCC Executive Secretary Patricia Espinosa expressed the desire to replicate the experience of the African Regional Hub in other regions, while the 15th session of the CBD COP will be held in two parts – a digital session in October 2021 and an in-person one scheduled for 2022. However, these still appear to be considered exceptions, rather than the rule (as the upcoming UNGA 76 and UNFCCC COP26 suggest).

Still, long-term adoption of digital ways of working can only benefit from further UN system-wide cooperation. In an article in *Climate Policy* in 2020, former UNFCCC leaders lamented rivalries among agencies and called for a mobilisation of the entire UN system towards a more coordinated and impactful collaboration to implement climate action. Two common threads within and across UN agencies that could foster such cooperation are a desire to build back better and to incorporate health as a transboundary challenge. The pandemic has accelerated the drive for worldwide access to digital technology, sparking a move away from the laissez-faire approach of the past. The Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, released in 2020, aims to achieve universal, safe and fair connectivity by 2030 – a necessary condition for digital multilateralism to thrive. The report describes hybrid meetings as a viable option for post-pandemic multilateral diplomacy. The UN system now has an opportunity to embrace a digital transition so that in the future, we no longer lose time over the feasibility of online multilateralism, but instead focus on its desirability.

5. Welcoming an online UNFCCC process

“In terms of enabling more and more access, and access beyond the usual suspects, and in terms of easing on-the-ground involvement and engagement - if everything is done in a really meaningful, inclusive manner, I think the digital dimension is really potentially transformational.”

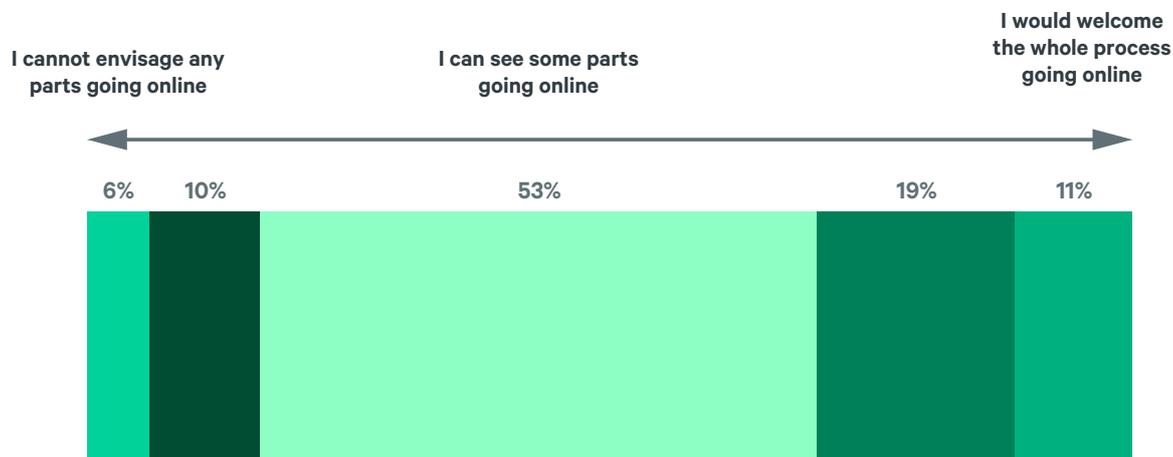
African civil society stakeholder

A majority of the 195 survey respondents, most with more than 10 years’ experience with the UNFCCC process, rate their recent experience¹ of working online within this context as neutral or good (75%) and would welcome moving some or many parts of the process online in the future (72%). “Virtual meetings under the UNFCCC are not entirely new – they’re already happening. They can do it – that’s the bottom line,” said Tracy Bach, RINGO co-focal point and professor of law and public policy. An advisor to vulnerable development countries said: “I’d rather see us go completely virtual and have to justify when we don’t want to have a virtual meeting.”

While connectivity issues clearly haven’t been solved, there is a sense from some that they are no longer the intractable challenge they once were. “My experience in the past year is that... it does not present too much of a barrier, or a reason why meetings cannot be held virtually. The challenges related to accessibility to internet connectivity, bandwidth, and so on... would be whether that can be guaranteed to at least be facilitated to a functional level,” said Kishan

¹ Survey responses were collected between the beginning of March and end of May of 2021, prior to the SB sessions in May–June 2021.

What do you think about moving the UNFCCC process online?



Source: Authors' own analysis.

Kumarsingh, lead negotiator for Trinidad and Tobago. Others emphasised the pace at which people are gaining access to the internet in developing countries: “Everybody is online, you know. We have leapfrogged the technology in this country [Bangladesh] in a very, very significant manner, that connects us with the whole world” (Saleemul Huq, director of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development).

There is also strong consensus that some issues and activities under the UNFCCC – such as procedural and preparatory work, information-sharing and plenary sessions, and work on more technical issues – are easier to manage online than others and may even be preferable to host online. More than half of respondents felt that thematic workshops and expert meetings (75%), technical review processes (65%), informal consultations (similar to the June Momentum) (64%), Bureau meetings (55%), activities under the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (53%) and meetings of constituted bodies (53%) could be held online in the future. Smaller meetings with set agendas, particularly those without a mandate to reach a decision, generated the least contention.

Opportunities to harness

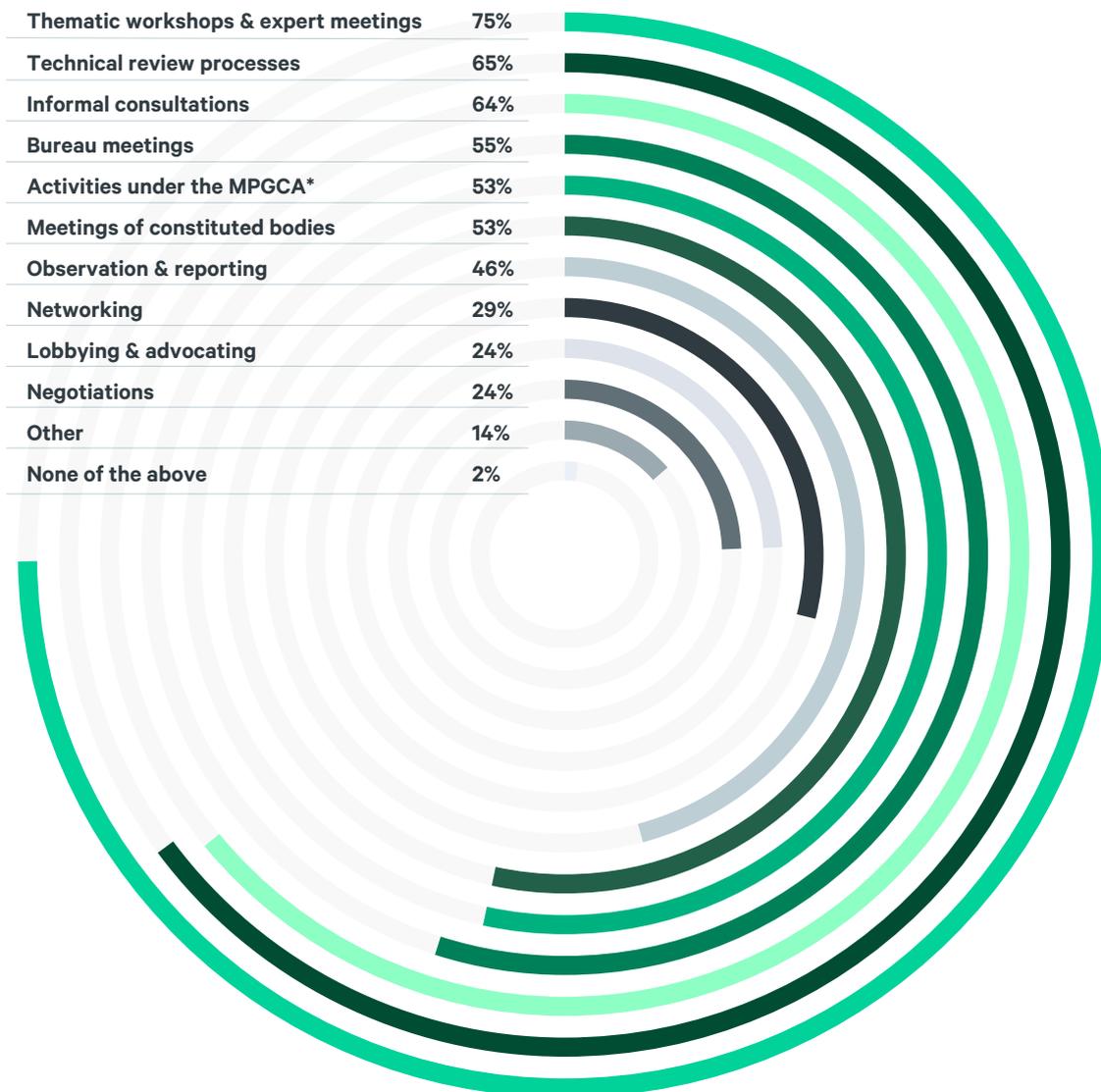
A willingness to work more online could arguably be explained by the opportunities stakeholders noted it could afford, with striking similarities – regardless of their affiliation – in the types of activities respondents felt could be held online, and the opportunities they saw in moving more of the process online in the future.

About two-thirds (67%) of respondents noted the benefits of not having to travel and/or finding it easier to participate. More than half felt it could lead to new ways of working (61%) and recognised opportunities to engage more people in the process (58%) – including both technical experts and civil society. This could increase accessibility (with enhanced affordability) and strengthen inclusiveness and diversity. Many emphasised the opportunity to lower the carbon footprint of the UNFCCC process, which could have wider benefits in increasing the integrity of the process (given its mandate) and in setting an example. Participants noted the potential to spread work more throughout the year, convene more often in working groups, facilitate more frequent consultation between the Presidency, Bureau and heads of delegation, or follow different streams simultaneously, making the process more efficient and flexible and providing participants with a more holistic view.

“There’s an opportunity here that can be maximised and that is inclusivity: the delegations or the countries that traditionally can only afford a certain level of participation in terms of numbers, can now be afforded the opportunity to expand those numbers, getting the expertise that they need... It will strengthen the negotiations, because you have a more expanded resource base from which you can draw... [we can have] more civil society organisations represented on the delegation, we can also have more gender balance.”

Kishan Kumarsingh, lead negotiator for Trinidad and Tobago

What types of activities (if any) do you think could be held online in the future?



Source: Authors' own analysis.

*MPGCA = Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action

Some stakeholders emphasised the opportunity for greater transparency: “Virtual meetings would increase pressure to enhance transparency, which in turn increases efficiency,” said one observer. Others remarked on how much easier it was to organise events online and to mobilise high-profile speakers. Many stakeholders cited the possibility of hosting more side events online, noting the opportunity for broader participation while also cautioning against the loss of networking opportunities provided by such events. Tracy Bach, RINGO co-focal point and professor of law and public policy, said: “Side events are the kind of COP activity that could be delivered quite well in webinar format, as we know now.”

A combined 59% of those who responded to the survey felt that online technology could strengthen the UNFCCC process in ways that would add value, through increased efficiency, transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, democracy, focus, flexibility, cooperation and action.

6. Concerns with an online UNFCCC process

Stakeholders weigh some concerns more heavily than others when considering certain types of activities within the UNFCCC process. Activities that are seen as more difficult to host online include decision-making, political negotiations, networking, lobbying and pressure-building, activities that require long and active participation (especially in non-established networks), trust-building, and certain activities that rely on in-person relationships and being able to “read the room”.

Stakeholders expressed concerns that are grounded both in their experience and what they anticipate could occur in the future, while they interpreted others’ concerns as legitimate in some cases, but only tactical in other cases. Their concerns fall into several categories – technical, logistical, political, legal, procedural, social, cognitive and psychological – that can be grouped into four headlines. Below we discuss each in turn.

A. A more online UNFCCC process could accentuate existing power imbalances in the negotiations.

The perceived risk of exacerbating existing disparities and inequalities in the transition to a more online UNFCCC process was mentioned in an overwhelming majority of interviews and by one-third of survey respondents. Strikingly, “unequal power dynamics” was of equal concern to observer and Party representatives, cited by 35% of respondents respectively, and notably less so by UNFCCC secretariat and other UN staff, at 9.5%. Such concerns appear to be either of an organisational or a political nature.

Organisational

Many emphasised that a more online UNFCCC process could specifically disadvantage the active and effective participation of delegates from developing countries. The choice of time zone – and the resulting need to work at odd hours – was cited repeatedly. In the survey, time zones and scheduling was one of stakeholders’ most important concerns, mentioned in 69% of responses. Stakeholders also noted the following elements of what has been called “the digital divide”:

- The required infrastructure and/or functionality of the platform in use, which some have less access to, experience of, and confidence with than others – and which varies not only from country to country, but from city to city; in the survey, the functionality of online platforms represented 47% of stakeholders’ concerns;
- The lack of reliable electricity or a stable internet connection (which affects not only representation, but also the smooth conduct of negotiations: “The connection issues, they’re not the most conducive to fluid engagement, which often the success of negotiation hinges upon,” said a stakeholder from African civil society); in the survey, 40% of stakeholders considered internet access a concern;
- Challenges in effective translation and interpretation, affecting some more than others;
- Difficulties in speaking up online, which may affect some groups more than others and thereby exacerbate gender, cultural or intersecting inequalities.

Delegates from developed countries were also seen to benefit from greater experience with online tools, which made them more confident and optimistic about their use. The loss of daily subsistence allowances (per diems) when meetings move online was also noted as a concern for developing-country delegates. Some said the allowances not only play a role in enabling participation, but in some cases also help support their work throughout the year.

CONCERNS CITED IN BOTH DEVELOPED AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Some concerns are widely shared. Many stakeholders cited the concern that a move online would make it harder to focus and prioritise due to high risks of distraction and interruption, work overload (considering expectations to also complete other work while online), fatigue associated with spending long periods online, and blurred work-life distinctions.

“When we are negotiating in our countries, there are a lot of other obligations to our daily work. But when we actually meet in a host country, then a lot of these obligations fall away,” said Nisreen Elsaim, climate negotiator, African Group of Negotiators and UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. “If somebody is in their country, and their secretary or their minister knows that they’re in Dhaka, or they’re in Conakry, then it’s really difficult for them, they get a call, they have to take it – it’s hierarchies,” said an advisor to vulnerable developing countries.

It should also be emphasised that connectivity concerns were not limited to representatives from developing countries, and many stakeholders from developed countries also expressed their frustration at the disruptions caused by poor internet connections. Fears of security risks and breaches in confidentiality cut across developed and developing country perspectives as well.

Political

Many emphasised that those with more institutional and economic power could use the transition to a more online UNFCCC process to further entrench their power or advance their political goals. This leads many to adopt a “*better the devil you know than the devil you don’t*” attitude. Some stakeholders argued that the power of the chair or convenor (or indeed the COP Presidency or the Bureau) is enhanced in an online setting. Who shapes the process, and how, is seen as critical in the selection of agenda items. As one stakeholder said: “So much of power relationships in the UNFCCC process depends on how much influence you have on the agenda and the moving forward of the process” (Paul Watkinson, counsellor to the director for European and International Affairs in the French Ministry for Ecological and Solidarity Transition, former chair of SBSTA and lead negotiator for France). Some expressed fear that a chair could take advantage of an online process to block people from being heard or reduce the inclusiveness and transparency of the process. The result might be a more efficient process, but achieved at the expense of representative and meaningful debate. As Paul Watkinson put it: “Efficiency can be a false friend... for example, issues that are of higher priority for the Global South are more likely to be put aside.” There was also concern that false claims of technical problems could be used as tactics to block the process – for instance, to claim the criteria for consent were not met. “The usual process is ‘He who is silent when he ought to have spoken and was able to speak, is taken to agree’. The whole issue is about the ‘able to’, and this is going to be very tricky, when it comes to the online space. All kinds of tricks could take place in how you assess concerns based on the usual process of taking silence for granted acceptance” (African civil society stakeholder).

As illustrated during the SB sessions held in May–June 2021, a move online could also widen the gap between Party delegates and civil society if it is seen to be exploited to restrict access, reduce transparency and limit meaningful engagement. “I cannot overemphasise the role of transparency to increase trust and rationality in decisions,” said one stakeholder. “The public eye and pressure from observers are important for holding negotiators and Parties to account.”

THE TRUST DEFICIT

Mistrust undermines the success of the UNFCCC process, whether it is offline or online. The effectiveness of any enablers to overcome the concerns and barriers stated here depends on the extent to which mistrust of Parties, processes, people and platforms can be converted to trust.

Parties, processes and power

Keeping promises is key to building and maintaining trust, and so is negotiating in good faith and respecting the process. Yet the apparent or perceived failure of some Parties to meet their commitments, particularly on finance mobilisation and NDC implementation, is undermining confidence in a shared sense of urgency. At the same time, efforts by some Parties to build loose reporting rules that would allow them to avoid scrutiny and accountability also casts a cloud over the resolution of final elements of the Paris Agreement. “Trust depends on actions – you get trust by being trustworthy,” stated one stakeholder (Tasneem Essop, executive director of Climate Action Network-International). “Already, it’s a process that’s so fraught with inequalities and lack of trust that we don’t want to end up exacerbating those,” said another (Anju Sharma, consultant, Global Center for Adaptation).

The current climate of mistrust arguably leads some stakeholders to see the move to a more online approach as a way for some to advance specific vested interests at others’ expense. However, the opposite concern was also cited. Some saw objections to an online process as a means of stalling progress, which again serves the interests of some over others’ – particularly those of the Least Developed Countries, which stand to lose the most from delays. So-called “vaccine apartheid” might aggravate such grievances. Disparities between nations’ access to COVID-19 vaccines not only intensify the prevailing climate of mistrust between Parties, but also have a particular bearing on support for hybrid formats (that combine virtual and in-person modalities) and the extent to which they could be considered genuinely representative and inclusive.

People and platforms

Many stakeholders emphasised the importance of personal relationships in building trust, noting that establishing and cultivating relationships could be more difficult in a virtual process. “Decisions typically aren’t made in the negotiating rooms – they are often in the corridor and often before – and they’re based on trust, cultivated from individual to individual; this is tricky virtually – you don’t know who you are talking to,” said an advisor to vulnerable developing countries. Bonding online is made all the more difficult by a lack of trust in technology – specifically data management, cybersecurity and privacy. Technology imposes a tricky trade-off between increasing security and maintaining accessibility. “The challenge is to convince Parties that there are secure ways of negotiating digitally,” argued one stakeholder at our roundtable with technical experts.

Building trust on the road ahead

Support for moving more of the UNFCCC process online is undermined by the mistrust outlined here – in all its mutually reinforcing guises. And yet many of the diverse activities organised under the UNFCCC could be moved online in ways that begin to build bridges. In that case, not only could such a move attract ever-increasing levels of support – it could transform and optimise the process more fundamentally, tackling arguably the greatest impediment to accelerated and ambitious global action on climate change.

“The problem of these negotiations is its complexity, its history, which puts the issue of trust in front of everything else. The most important issue that we’ve been facing in these negotiations, that comes back every year, is how to restore, maintain, build up, keep – well, you can use the entire thesaurus – trust... And because of that, people are extremely reluctant to accept any novelties, which need to be properly explained in an inclusive and transparent process.”

Tomasz Chruszczow, senior fellow European Round Table on Climate Change and Sustainable Transition, former Chair of SBI and former Chair of SBSTA in UNFCCC

B. A more online UNFCCC process could impede active participation, interaction and relationship-building.

When considering their concerns about a more online UNFCCC process, about one-third of respondents to the survey emphasised the potential loss of networking (34%), as well as cooperation and interaction (33%). “The one thing we really figured out over the last 10 years is how important it is for people to connect as human beings to overcome some of the problems that the negotiations face,” stressed one stakeholder (Anju Sharma, consultant, Global Center for Adaptation).

“I think there is a part which matters in this process... let’s call it the social side... the fact that people know each other; to be able to reach agreements isn’t simply about repeating positions... it is actually knowing some of the people and being able to judge them, the human contact. Personalities do matter. That’s harder to build when you’re only working online.”

Paul Watkinson, counsellor to the director for European and International Affairs in the French Ministry for Ecological and Solidarity Transition, former chair of SBSTA and lead negotiator for France

Civil society representatives expressed concerns that they could more easily be excluded and have less access to, and engagement with, decision-makers as a result of more passive watching and less room for meaningful dialogue. They voiced a perceived trade-off between increased participation and influence: “They [the organisers] are happy to say ‘X’ thousand civil society members are able to connect, but without direct opportunities of engagement,” said one stakeholder. Observers also stressed the difficulties in effectively lobbying or advocating online without powerful pressure tools that build transparency and accountability – such as the ability to “look each other in the eye” and (through their physical presence) demonstrate that “someone was watching”. Only 24% of survey respondents thought it was possible to lobby or advocate online, while journalists also emphasised the challenges in effective reporting: “It is more difficult to neglect a person standing in front of you than an email,” noted one stakeholder. This is especially true because negotiators arguably have more control over the voices they choose to hear online than they do in a physical setting.

Some stakeholders from developed countries also expressed concerns that they would have difficulties engaging colleagues in developing countries in an online context if they suffered disproportionately from access and connectivity problems. This would apply in particular to indigenous peoples. “Normally you would hear really profound voices coming from our indigenous peoples, and also their active participation through being able to sit down, observe and contribute to the sessions – they were not able to actively engage in these SB sessions” (Michai Robertson, advisor to the chair (climate change, oceans and legal) for the Alliance of Small Island States).

Journalists similarly felt that it would be harder for them to network with international stakeholders online, and to cover the actions of foreign governments accurately, potentially penalising smaller and more local media organisations. They also expressed concern about the lack of transparency of online meetings – a fear (borne out to some extent by experiences over the last year) that online talks will make it harder for them to gather information, secure interviews, cover the story and hold less transparent stakeholders to account.

Other stakeholders emphasised that online forums obscure important forms of non-verbal communication and change the dynamics of a conversation. In face-to-face settings, when people cross-talk, both can be heard; the functionality of many online platforms means only one voice is heard at a time. While this can have benefits, ensuring that no one is talked over, it can also disrupt the flow of conversation, increase the time it takes to debate and find resolution, and create unease and anxiety among participants. Stakeholders stressed the difficulties in getting to know one another online, making new acquaintances and building the kinds of personal relationships and connections that are key to consensus-building, especially as differences in culture need to be bridged. In particular, the risk of “alienating” newcomers in such an environment was noted: “Online negotiations are possible if people already know each other and trust each other to some extent, but creating human bonding online is a real challenge,” said one African civil society stakeholder. Others thought that such forums were not conducive to negotiators who tend to be “extroverts who need the energy in the room to connect”.

Stakeholders emphasised that it is also hard to replicate the spontaneous interactions (such as bilaterals or huddles, in a corridor or a bar) that are considered by many to be crucial for

negotiating, lobbying and “getting the story”. Without such spaces, regional and political blocs would have fewer opportunities to coordinate, while negotiators from “opposite sides” would have less opportunity to resolve difficult issues or get beyond national positions to find common ground. It was noted that “huddles” are where the real power lies in offline contexts: “People who meet for a few minutes and make it happen,” noted one stakeholder. But it was also felt that these activities helped participants to better understand the process and one another. Positions may become even more polarised if such informal exchanges – which provide opportunities to hear from individuals outside one’s own echo chamber – were not an option. In sum, there are fears that opportunities for the kinds of interpersonal and informal interaction that are crucial to consensus-building, as well as influencing and advancing agendas, could be limited or hampered in an online environment.

CONCERNS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE MEDIA

Many representatives of civil society and indigenous people organisations expressed concern that a digital environment will impede their watchdog, advocacy and advisory activities. Giving the example of COP19 in Warsaw – when NGOs and social movements walked out of the talks to denounce government inaction and fossil-fuel industry interference – they pointed to the influence that scrutiny and symbolic actions can have on talks, and how remote participation might jeopardise this power.

Meanwhile, many journalists expressed dismay at seeing coverage of the UNFCCC process become less diverse since COP26 was postponed, and increasingly restricted to the big emitters. One person pointed to the strengthened role of forums such as the G7 in the governance of climate change and stressed that the voices of developing countries are not heard in such arenas. The question was raised of how media could maintain a conversation with such countries if there were fewer opportunities to meet face to face or if the global response to climate change were increasingly governed at tables where they were not entitled to a seat. However, others felt that it would be less problematic to host parts of the UNFCCC process online as the Paris Agreement transitions and the importance of local and national media coverage – reporting on the domestic implementation of the global agreement – rises.

While the move away from negotiation-intensive summits creates opportunities for civil society and indigenous peoples to be more deeply involved in implementation activities, the switch to an online format could be a major setback for them if it diminishes their influence. They are conscious that their interests and perspectives must be effectively represented to be accounted for within the UN walls, and that the distance created by screens may enhance distrust between observers and Parties. NGOs are proactively shifting their strategies to maintain their relevance and increase their influence in the talks, aware that their work and role will have to adapt as the Paris Agreement enters a new phase and the process evolves in uncharted ways.

C. A more online UNFCCC process could affect the legitimacy and effectiveness of the decision-making process.

When considering their concerns about a more online UNFCCC process, 39% of survey respondents cited challenges in making formal decisions or reaching conclusions:

- Some questioned the legality or legitimacy of such a process (28% mentioned the rules of procedure and terms of engagement, which don’t specifically address or facilitate such a scenario).

“The online format creates challenges that certain countries can take advantage of and exploit. ... If you want to efficiently and effectively progress into this space of online negotiations, this needs to receive the consensus of all Parties to amend the rules of procedure to make things a bit easier for such a setting ... This feat has the potential to be as politically tedious as attempting to amend the UNFCCC, or the Paris Agreement for example.”

Michai Robertson, advisor to the chair (climate change, oceans and legal) for the Alliance of Small Island States

- Some argued that there is little appetite or support among Parties to formalise such a process.
- Others questioned the terms that would apply in such a process: “It is unclear if some decisions can be made online and some left for later,” said one stakeholder.

A number of stakeholders proposed that making the process work online would require a smaller, more simplified agenda: “The sheer volume of it [the process] is difficult to handle online,” one opined. Others pointed to the political challenges inherent in such an attempt: “It is difficult to fix priorities – different themes reflect an overall balance.” It is notable that the most frequently cited reasons for meetings not being held online in 2020 and 2021 were that Parties were unwilling or lacking in ambition (31% of survey respondents in free-text answers), and that there was no agreement on how formal decisions online should be made (24%).

Negotiating is a particularly thorny issue. Only 24% of survey respondents felt that negotiations could be held online, with many interviewees emphasising that they saw little prospect of this changing in the near future. Delegates appear to find it difficult to conceive of such activities taking place online when they have never done so before. The terms of engagement are unclear or unknown, and respondents expressed a general aversion to negotiating controversial, contested, or political topics online. In sum, a move online is perceived as inappropriate for political negotiations. A typical prerequisite or condition for hosting talks online has been that no decisions (that have a legal bearing) will be made.

Concerns were also voiced that an online process would be less effective – for example, as a result of delays and slow decision-making online. Consultation and coordination were cited by 31% of survey respondents as particular concerns. Another key concern noted was that momentum would be lost if the annual session of the COP were to move online or be cancelled. There is a perception that there would be less pressure to deliver in an online context (without the time pressure invoked by an in-person process). Late-night marathon meetings, which can prompt breakthrough moments in traditional COP sessions, were said to be hard to envisage online. Moreover, beyond the formal political settlement, the in-person COP session was noted for its outcomes in networking, awareness-raising and pivoting attention (in ways that are conducive to both attention-grabbing headlines and putting pressure on decision-makers). These are benefits that may be less likely to materialise in an online context, stakeholders feared. “Online you see the same people all the time; with COP you see new people,” argued one stakeholder. Another said: “COP is like a wedding – the preparatory activities are very important – but it won’t happen without the actual ceremony” (Nisreen Elsaim, climate negotiator, African Group of Negotiators and UN Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change). Journalists also questioned whether news outlets would devote editorial space to climate issues without an obvious hook. Indeed, the in-person COP sessions have been essential for climate coverage in the media.

“For many developing countries and least developed countries, there is an urgency to move forward. It puts us in a very tight place. I’d rather we don’t move forward than move forward in the wrong way.”

Nisreen Elsaim, climate negotiator,
African Group of Negotiators and UN
Youth Advisory Group on Climate
Change

D. A more online UNFCCC process comes with such a high degree of uncertainty of outcomes that stakeholders’ risk aversion prevails.

Uncertainties about how going online will affect the UNFCCC process – and make it either better or worse for inclusiveness, transparency and effectiveness – have led many stakeholders to be more risk-averse. For example, as stakeholders noted:

- An online process has the potential to engage a much larger and more diverse set of observers and stakeholders, yet it could also weaken engagement and influence – especially if the vast majority of participants can only watch, rather than engage with negotiators and decision-makers, and/or if the lack of a COP limits the inflow of new people and perspectives.

- An online process could enhance transparency by increasing the level of scrutiny (which, in turn, could help or hinder negotiations), yet it could also impede transparency by restricting the access of non-Party stakeholders or enhancing control over the release of messages.
- An online process could risk exacerbating current inequalities or present an opportunity to alleviate them.

Furthermore, there are numerous factors that influence the suitability of a meeting or session for an online format – including the number of agenda items, clarity of items discussed, quality of leadership and moderation, number of participants, duration, directionality of exchange (presentations versus group discussions), level of familiarity and trust among participants, and the level of importance and contention ascribed to the issue under consideration. These factors make it hard for stakeholders to hold generalised views.

Trust in an online process is also undermined by uncertainty and insecurity about the applicability of established procedures, whether necessary outcomes can be achieved, and whether “trial and error” risks setting precedents for new ways of working that are less transparent, inclusive or effective. Some arguably fear losing control, others instinctively react against the “strangeness” of a new mode of operating. Stakeholders’ views are often also divided. For instance, 46% of survey respondents think “observing and reporting” could be done online in the future, but “less access for observers” and “limited influence” are also among the most commonly experienced impacts of moving online in 2020 and 2021, as cited by respondents to the survey (27% in free-text answers – indeed more often cited as a challenge than internet connection). All this adds to the sense of confusion.

7. Overcoming challenges

Some of the concerns associated with an online process can potentially be overcome organically with time. As lessons are learned from previous experiences, stakeholders get used to working online and become more confident using online tools, and technological advancements increasingly meet their needs and demands. Addressing other concerns will require deliberate design to strengthen transparency, inclusiveness and effectiveness.

Stakeholders proposed a variety of solutions for overcoming obstacles, ranging from straightforward steps to address specific issues, to bolder approaches that could more deeply transform the UNFCCC process. Many would entail innovative ways of working and reaching agreement online. It should be noted that stakeholders typically (and understandably) appeared to have devoted less energy to devising solutions than to considering the problems they aimed to address, and so many suggested remedies were speculative in nature. Further ideas and innovations will no doubt continue to be developed.

Stakeholders’ ideas to overcome challenges

1. Fostering accessibility to participate in meetings, and reducing inequalities:

- Build international cooperation to ensure that there is universal access to strong, reliable broadband connections for all delegates, alongside investment in state-of-the-art interpretation.
- Offer capacity-building support to negotiate online (through “mock negotiations”) and training on practical use of online tools more widely, with the specific aim of overcoming inequities in technological literacy.

2. Strengthening interactions amongst participants:

- Carefully plan the structure of sessions and meetings to encourage and enable interactivity and equip chairs and facilitators with bespoke training to host events online.
- Embed virtual spaces for bilateral interactions between observers and negotiators, actively strengthening the role of civil society and media in a more online implementation phase. For example, this could include increasing the number of press conferences given by heads of negotiating blocks to ensure the regular flow of information and strengthened accountability.

3. Prioritising the mental and physical well-being of virtual attendees:

- Acknowledge and address the necessary trade-offs involved in working online – such as the issue of time zones, for which there is no silver-bullet solution (options include extending negotiations and other activities to accommodate several time zones, asking stakeholders to change sleeping habits to conform to one time zone, or conducting meetings twice, but each has its pitfalls for participants and the process).
- Invite governments, affiliated organisations and employers to address practical challenges, such as providing a quiet place to attend meetings, uninterrupted; ensuring appropriate remuneration; and avoiding double-work demands.

4. Working towards secure and widely accepted technological solutions:

- Ensure that agreement is reached on an open-source platform (potentially one used UN-wide), that replaces the current reliance on private companies based in a single country.
- Advance multilateral agreement on the use of federated servers and global standards through a transparent and inclusive international process.
- Pioneer public-private partnerships that harness the expertise of the private sector in the development of technological solutions that work towards universal connectivity.

5. Imagining the meetings of tomorrow:

- Test creative solutions, such as the use of (physical) regional hubs, which, if effective, could address many of the challenges presented above by enabling structured dialogue on specific contexts and topics, facilitating better coordination of interest groups, and centralising resources and efforts (which ease access to stable and permanent technology in developing countries). Opening them to civil society could potentially allow more observers to engage. This more local, bottom-up approach is also well aligned with the transition in focus from global negotiations to national and regional implementation.
- Mix both online and in-person elements – such as reduced in-person summits with ongoing rolling virtual activities – which would enable a streamlined accreditation process and a refocus on the core activities of the COP, while keeping an annual event to maintain momentum and attention.
- Consider the implications of the digital transition and adapt and iterate processes accordingly. As one stakeholder cautioned: “A fully online COP needs more diplomacy outreach, to have come further in preparation – near-ready agreements when you get to meet.”

6. Openness to deeper transformation:

- Set aside the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,” which could allow work to commence in more “bite-size” pieces online and arguably be more effective and efficient, regardless of the format.
- Encourage future COP Presidencies to make proactive attempts to develop strategies to engage negotiating groups on the issues and modus operandi of decision-making, in recognition of the disenfranchisement that many feel, and the perceived inadequacy of the process to proceed at a pace that matches ambition.
- Open a dialogue on how the rules of procedure might be reinterpreted in light of the digital experience, and in the longer term consider revisiting them for more fundamental

reform. This might have been considered taboo even a few short months ago: “Voting would be a Pandora’s box ... don’t touch the rules of procedure,” argued one stakeholder. But there may be an increasing appetite to revise them: “The rules of procedure are less and less appropriate to the needs of the process, and to the switch online; the conversation has not happened yet but needs to,” argued one representative from the project’s advisory group.

- Consider using permanent representations to negotiate – which could draw on existing representatives based in Geneva, Nairobi, New York or within embassies, or involve entirely new institutional arrangements and the implementation of a new permanent body. This would allow negotiations to continue year-round.

Building an environment conducive to positive change

Several stakeholders provided comments on how to create a conducive enabling environment for a digital transition – regarding the sequencing of steps required and the ways and means of approaching such a process. “Start small and increase in complexity,” noted one stakeholder, beginning with technical work and hybrid solutions before attempting politically sensitive negotiations. Recognise the need for strong thought leadership, noted others, potentially making a move online an outcome of a future Presidency. Take time to consult, iterate and allow ideas and proposals to socialise, stakeholders urged, and provide clarity on terms of engagement, representation and mandates online.

Many emphasised the principles that needed to be at the forefront of the process, such as creating openness and equal opportunities to participate; ensuring sessions are designed to be flexible, innovative and interactive, with a focus on encouraging and enabling active engagement; accounting for the inclusion of civil society and their ability to lobby effectively; and embedding continual learning to better address technical difficulties and security concerns and to acknowledge and accommodate trade-offs.

Acknowledging the limits and risks of new ideas

It is important to note that stakeholders also identified drawbacks to the solutions proposed. These include local tensions and safety concerns that may affect the feasibility and efficacy of regional hubs (including the risk of violent conflict in certain regions and unequal vaccine access); the difficulties in balancing adequate but limited representation in some hybrid solutions; and the conservative approach to decision-making, based on consensus, compromise and concessions, which makes more ambitious proposals unlikely to garner sufficient support to progress. The Presidency, Secretariat and chairs could have a big role to play in catalysing some of the bold changes suggested above, but this may also reinforce the fear that these stakeholders are able to wield too much power.

Views on a deeper transformation of the process – such as the option of permanent representation – were also contested. Some argued that it could allow stakeholders and negotiators to really get to know one another and solve the issue of newcomer integration, while ending some of the practices that undermine the participation and representation of developing countries (the extension of COP sessions to reach decisions after delegates have been forced to return home being a case in point). However, others pointed to the limits of engagement of specialised agencies (since permanent representatives are non-specialised) and the difficulties of imposing deadlines. “The fact that there is always the possibility to delay means that there is not enough pressure to deliver,” noted one member of the project’s advisory group. However, it was mentioned that in the current format of the negotiations, respect of deadlines is also an issue.

“It’s not a challenge, I see it as a huge opportunity. It has run the same way, same old, same old, for 30-odd years. And so I think that this is a stepping stone to modernising how we do business.”

Former staff member of the UNFCCC Secretariat

8. Conclusions

After 25 years of regular and ever-growing climate talks under the UNFCCC, COVID-19 brought in-person meetings to a halt. However, even before the pandemic, there were concerns that COP sessions were no longer fit for purpose. Progress in the negotiations had slowed, particularly after the adoption of the 2015 Paris Agreement. When the climate talks came to a complete standstill in 2020, the question shifted to whether a move online was not simply the only viable alternative, but a virtuous one that could conceivably change the UNFCCC process for the better.

“Innovation is a necessity now. And we should not be shy to try new things.”

Kishan Kumarsingh, lead negotiator for Trinidad and Tobago

The timing for a move online is serendipitous, and such a move could be transformative. It coincides with the UNFCCC’s shift from forging a global agreement to implementing that agreement at the national level. It also coincides with the rapid global spread of internet technology and with mounting pressure on the UNFCCC to reduce the carbon footprint of the climate talks. This confluence of events presents a unique opportunity – not merely to replicate the current UNFCCC process online, but to reimagine and transform it, so it becomes more inclusive, transparent and effective.

Our study found broad support for hosting more of the UNFCCC’s work online, not only during the pandemic, but beyond. However, the many stakeholders who shared their views with us also voiced a range of concerns. Some have already been addressed as many parts of the UNFCCC process experimented with working online during the pandemic. Others are likely to become less relevant over time as online technology advances and the shift from negotiation to implementation progresses. Yet some concerns are more difficult to assuage. Several predate the pandemic – including issues related to trust and power. Nevertheless, they need to be acknowledged and addressed for a move online to reap greater rewards.

This report contains a series of recommendations for Sweden (the initiator and funder of the study), the EU, all Parties to the UNFCCC, the UNFCCC Secretariat, civil society organisations and media representatives. Across these recommendations, two points become clear:

- A shift to working online is not merely a technical and political process; 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. The elaborate stakeholder engagement process we conducted for this study has yielded many valuable insights, and this process could be meaningfully extended as a consultation to inform the co-creation process.
- The pandemic, along with all the suffering it created, has presented us with a unique opportunity to build climate diplomacy back better. To seize this opportunity, creative leadership and initiative are essential to set priorities for a transition online, address entrenched and emerging inequalities, and overcome reluctance to change. Leadership can be found in many places in the UNFCCC process, but so too can risk aversion. The critical push to move the climate talks online beyond the pandemic may need to come from the UN system at large, led by Secretary-General António Guterres. A simple transition could thus pave the way to a deeper transformation – strengthening the global governance of one of humanity’s greatest challenges.

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