

Enhancing resilience to global crises in the UNFCCC climate arena

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Key messages

- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequities within the climate negotiations, demonstrating a need to rethink how the formal UNFCCC process can be made more inclusive and equitable.
 - These inequalities have become more apparent through challenges posed by the COVID pandemic to both the ability to participate and the outcomes of climate negotiations.
 - The pandemic has negatively influenced the participation and inclusion of representatives from Global South countries, marginalized groups and civil society organizations by exacerbating existing gaps in financial and technical capacity between countries. Travel restrictions presented a much more serious barrier to Global South participation, given the existing structural inequalities (e.g. disproportionate visa barriers) in the global travel regime.
 - As country negotiators' interests are heavily constrained by the short-term interests of their country, there is currently very little incentive for negotiators from powerful countries to support the position of less powerful countries, despite it being in the long-term global interest to do so.
 - The outcomes of negotiations are profoundly impacted by the power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South. The pandemic increased this imbalance as Global South countries became more dependent on Global North countries for vaccines and health aid.
 - The pandemic has severely impacted trust between Global North and Global South countries due to vaccine inequality and the failure of developed countries to meet existing climate finance targets, notwithstanding their ability to quickly mobilize large amounts of finance to cope with COVID domestically. This contributed to Global South countries exerting more pressure for increased climate finance for adaptation and loss and damage.
 - The pandemic has also highlighted how climate change interacts with other global crises and geopolitical power dynamics. Truly resilient climate negotiations therefore require the existing wider power dynamics that permeate international climate diplomacy to be tackled.
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1. Introduction

In the two and a half years since the World Health Organization declared the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, reports have shown how the pandemic is impacting action on the climate crisis. In the year preceding the 26th Conference of Parties (COP) to the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change** (UNFCCC), a survey of least developed countries' (LDCs) negotiators showed that they were concerned that COVID-19 would impact both the frequency and intensity of climate negotiations as well as the amount of climate finance that developed countries might be willing to pledge (Craft et al., 2021).

In April 2021, the United States held the Leaders' Summit on Climate. At the same time, in South Asian countries, the health infrastructure was crumbling and the death toll rising under waves of the delta variant. These countries were looking to developed countries, including the United States, for vaccine and health aid. The May–June 2021 sessions of the UNFCCC subsidiary bodies (SBs) was held online, and a previous SEI study on online climate negotiations gave them a “pass but with room for improvement”, with participants citing connectivity problems and transparency and accountability issues that cast doubts over how equitable the negotiations were (Klein et al., 2021). Moreover, in the run-up to the May–June 2021 SBs, while many developed countries were starting to bounce back from the pandemic and allocate more attention to climate issues, developing countries had yet to begin vaccination and were grappling with full-blown COVID waves. COP26, which was postponed for one year, was finally held in person in Glasgow in November 2021. In the run-up to the COP, negotiators and civil society organizations (CSOs), especially those from the Global South, faced hurdles in getting vaccines and dealing with expenses and barriers associated with quarantines and travel restrictions (Sengupta & Friedman,

2021). Fiji's ambassador publicly noted that the Pacific nations were forced to scale back their delegation for COP26, which blunted their negotiation power (Yi, 2021). At the venue, there was limited access (due to COVID restrictions) for environmental groups and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who typically monitor the negotiations, provide support to particularly needful delegations, and serve as a conduit to broader audiences.

The UNFCCC negotiations play an influential role in establishing the norms, principles and priorities for international climate action. There is well-documented evidence of the deeply entrenched, systemic inequalities that already underpin UNFCCC negotiations (Taylor, 2021). These relate to poor representation of marginalized groups and indigenous communities, lack of opportunities for engagement from civil society, unequal power dynamics between developed and developing country parties, and inequitable negotiating practices such as side conversations and huddles to make decisions (Comberti et al., 2019; Frenova, 2021; Lo, 2021). The pandemic has increased inequality between social groups (Ferreira, 2021; Yonzan et al., 2021). In this study, we investigated the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced, reproduced or amplified existing inequalities that plague the UNFCCC climate negotiations. We also studied how these inequities interact with broader geopolitical power dynamics.

The pandemic is not the first crisis to impact climate action. The austerity measures taken by many governments after the 2008 financial crisis derailed funding for climate action; the impacts of this were felt by the poorest communities worldwide (Triggs et al., 2019). As countries prepare for COP27 in Egypt, the repercussions of the war in Ukraine are also affecting the climate regime. There is an erosion of cooperation between countries, energy insecurities are leading countries to backtrack on climate commitments, and new oil and gas exploration in the Global South to meet short-term needs for energy is prompting discussions on whether the war will further entrench Global South countries in a fossil economy and with costly stranded assets.

To make progress on climate there is a need for equity in climate negotiations to be more resilient to global crises. Given the strong link between climate and broader structural inequities we find that, in the long term, creating resilience will require grappling with global power dynamics, most notably the colonial legacies embedded in global geopolitics. This suggests that for the climate regime to evolve into one more able to address our shared global climate crisis, we will require a more active shifting of power from the Global North to the Global South.

2. Methodology

Our data for this project was gathered primarily through stakeholder engagement with a small but select group of high-level, experienced party delegates, UNFCCC staff and representatives from observer constituencies. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 participants and convened a roundtable to discuss findings and seek feedback from stakeholders on recommendations. We also analysed related grey literature (newspaper articles, blog posts, social media output) and peer-reviewed literature where available.

Participation in our study was entirely voluntary and we made active attempts to contact representatives from as many observer constituencies and parties as possible. The information provided by participants is kept completely anonymous.

3. Equity and climate justice

Equity has been a part of the UNFCCC process since its inception. Parties agreed in Rio that the primary principle underpinning the UNFCCC is that “The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, *on the basis of equity* and in accordance with their *common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities*. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof.” [UNFCCC, 1992. *Article 1. Principles*], a principle that has been repeatedly reaffirmed in subsequent COP decisions. Literature on achieving equity in the UNFCCC process has focused on how justice is conceptualized and the different forms of justice pertinent to making the UNFCCC process truly equitable. Khan et al. (2020) conceptualize justice within the UNFCCC process as comprising distributive, procedural, recognition and compensatory dimensions. Distributive justice is the fair distribution of social goods and services – income, wealth and opportunity. Procedural justice is the fair representation of stakeholders in the decision-making process and its resulting outcomes. Compensatory justice is granting remedy for the harms caused by previous injustices. Recognition justice involves recognizing and challenging the norms and values that enable inequity.

Critical climate justice builds on these notions, in particular the lattermost, and examines how unjust dynamics within the climate regime arise from the historical and geographical disparities linked to the interlocking systems of colonialism, globalization and capitalism that maintain these injustices (Sultana, 2022). Achieving all forms of climate justice (distributive, procedural, recognition and compensatory) requires systemic change to destabilize the power regimes that reproduce these injustices in the first place.

The COVID pandemic underscored how global crises exacerbate unequal risks and burdens, having the greatest impacts on disadvantaged groups (Sidik, 2022). Many Global South countries were severely affected by insufficient vaccine access, overloaded healthcare facilities and infrastructure, and subsequent socioeconomic and political crises (Josephson et al., 2021; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020)¹. Concurrently, the disproportionate impacts of climate change are shaped by colonial, racial and gendered legacies of extraction and marginalization (see Kashwan and Ribot 2021; Sultana 2021). Amid the calls to address climate injustices and the inequities linked to such power imbalances, disadvantaged communities continue to bear the brunt of climate inaction and are the least represented in climate governance spaces (Sultana, 2022).

Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical companies of the Global North have booked extraordinary profits during the pandemic, in part by controlling and constraining the supply of vaccines (Dransfield et al., 2021). The impacts of the pandemic on the equity of climate negotiations were multi-dimensional. The pandemic exacerbated travel inequalities embedded in the existing regimes of visa barriers and travel restrictions (Brabandt & Mau, 2013; Recchi et al., 2021; Thew et al., 2022). The unequal distribution of the burdens and risks caused by the pandemic compounded with already limited resources and capacities of actors, especially from the Global South, placed undue strain on Global South negotiators and CSO participants in their ability to prepare for and engage effectively with the negotiations. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated the existing power imbalances between countries by increasing the reliance of the Global South on the Global North for resources (e.g. vaccines, financial aid), providing further geopolitical leverage for wealthier states.

While the UNFCCC process has hitherto focused on achieving climate action, in the post-COVID world, it becomes all the more vital to examine how climate action can achieve climate justice – a more equal distribution of the costs of climate inaction and the costs and benefits of climate action. In this report, we assess equity in the climate regime through a critical climate justice

¹ The Global North and Global South are defined here not as strict geographical entities but as in Perry (2021) as “a spatial cartography of political economic relations, resource flows and people suffering multiple exclusions due to neoliberal economic transformations”.

lens. We aim to understand how spatial and temporal imbalances in power intersect and result in differentiated abilities to engage effectively with the UNFCCC process and influence its outcomes, and, specifically, how these imbalances interacted with the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse how current modalities in the process are inadequate in addressing climate injustices and why they are so vulnerable to global crises. Ultimately, we identify the power regimes that the UNFCCC process and broader climate community would need to tackle for climate action to contribute to climate justice.

4. How did the pandemic impact the equity of climate negotiations?

4.1 Procedural justice: participation in UNFCCC climate negotiations

The pandemic exacerbated existing issues of participation and inclusion in the negotiations. The quarantine restrictions, flight cancellations and travel bans introduced during the pandemic made it more complicated for all participants to attend in-person negotiations. However, consulate closures and unequal access to vaccines made it particularly difficult for Global South participants.

Many of our interviewees noted that obtaining funding for the costs of participation in COPs and SBs – such as the costs of accommodation and flights – is challenging even in the absence of the pandemic. This is particularly challenging for observers and delegates from the Global South given the economic divide between countries (Halgren, 2021; Thew et al., 2022). During the pandemic, these costs went up as many participants had to travel large distances to get visas, book extra accommodation to account for quarantine restrictions, or had to make last-minute (and consequently more expensive) changes to their itinerary to account for the ever-evolving set of restrictions being put in place due to the pandemic.

Many interviewees noted that limited financial support, as well as lack of targeted attention paid to the capacity of delegations, presents barriers to participation, especially during the pandemic. The UNFCCC has a supplementary trust fund that provides financial support for the party delegates from low and middle income countries (LMICs) and small island developing states (SIDS) to participate in COPs and SBs. However, many Global South negotiators highlighted that only two negotiators per country are supported by the trust fund. During the pandemic, the ability of many countries (especially LMICs and SIDS) to fund negotiators was limited due to exorbitant travel fees. Even under normal circumstances, two negotiators alone do not constitute an adequate national delegation, especially given the stakes involved. An effective delegation must have the capacity to acquire expertise in several distinct thematic areas, prepare for negotiations, communicate with their national agencies in their own capitols as well as with allied delegates, attend coordination meetings with one or more regional groupings, and of course participate in the multiple (and often concurrent) negotiating streams during the UNFCCC sessions, which typically involve long days and intense diplomacy. Often, these same delegates must then be prepared to shift as soon as the COP is over to managing negotiations in yet another domain. This forces smaller, financially constrained countries to align themselves with blocs, which inevitably involves compromises, rather than develop and advocate their own national positions. Our interviewees reported that in large groups that present internally negotiated positions, the interests and agendas of particularly small or vulnerable countries in that group are often overlooked. Interviewees noted that poorer countries sometimes have large delegations, but very few delegates are negotiators who actively participate in negotiation, and are instead CSO representatives who can secure their own funding.

Observers are not eligible to have their participation funded by the UNFCCC, and they must be self-funded or obtain external funding to participate in any in-person negotiations. Securing this funding is hard for observer groups from the Global South and youth delegations. This was further complicated by the vaccine and travel restrictions introduced due to the pandemic. One interviewee explained that their entire network of observer organizations decided not to attend COP26 due to a lack of clarity around vaccine and quarantine requirements until much too close to the COP itself.

Many observers and negotiators also underlined the challenges in getting visas due to consulate closures and vaccine inequality. This was especially true for observers and party delegates from countries placed on the “red list” by the UK government, most of which were LDCs. Visitors to the UK from red list countries were required to pay for and quarantine in a government-approved hotel for 10 days. An interviewee disclosed that the COP presidency pressured participants to book accommodation ahead of time without providing adequate clarity as to whether the UK government would lift the quarantine restrictions and provide vaccinations for COP26 attendees.

At the COP26 site in Glasgow, observers faced further limits on participation and inclusion. Limitations on physical space and social distancing requirements curtailed participation – including cases in which observers were excluded from access to negotiation rooms at the venue. These restrictions compounded the existing barriers to participation that many observers interviewed noted were present even before the pandemic – including parties asking for closed room negotiations and CSOs not being informed (or informed at the last minute) about the scope of participation in different negotiation spheres. The restricted number of badges given per CSO constituency also presented a barrier to civil society participation. Interviewees from the UNFCCC secretariat pointed out that the number of badges for observers rises every year, as does the number of observer organizations – effectively reducing the number of badges per organization every year. The algorithm used by the UNFCCC allocates badges based on (among other criteria) previous attendance and engagement at the negotiations, in essence extending the impact of the COVID barriers, as CSO organizations that were not able to attend physical negotiations during the pandemic have reported having their badge count severely reduced for COP27.

Hybrid negotiations have been suggested as one way for climate negotiations to allow more participation while overcoming some of the financial constraints associated with physical attendance. During the pandemic some UNFCCC meetings and negotiations took place virtually (for instance the May–June 2021 SBs). Many interviewees questioned the quality of participation via a virtual format, with persisting issues of connectivity, electricity, digital technology, time zone, and lack of language interpretation facilities. With physical meetings postponed or cancelled, some interviewees pointed out that CSOs could not build relationships and alliances with each other or negotiators and missed opportunities to build alliances, which tends to be a key outcome of COP meetings for observers and delegates alike. Many also highlighted that virtual meetings created fatigue for both negotiators and observers, due to time zone differences and other calls on their time. Many Global South countries do not have an exclusive climate team, and thus negotiators participating virtually had to juggle other duties while attending the climate negotiations.

Some interviewees hypothesized that more investment in online infrastructure might allow Global South countries to more proactively consult and share positions, set agendas and build media strategies in their preparations for climate negotiations. However, given the visa barriers and lack of financial capacity in Global South countries, there is concern that a hybrid format would result in more Global North actors joining in person while Global South actors join virtually. This would create disparities in the ability of certain actors to build alliances and put forth their agenda during negotiations. A shift to virtual formats can also exacerbate inequalities within countries. A CSO interviewee from the Global South explained that their government used the pandemic, the “shift to virtual”, and the lack of technical capacity of local groups as a rationale to delay or omit consultations with CSOs and local communities in the run-up to COP26.

4.2 Content and outcomes of the negotiations

Our findings also indicate that COVID-19 impacted the equity of the content and outcomes of negotiations. In the run-up to COP26, many countries in the Global South faced challenges in preparing their negotiating strategy and in coordinating within their negotiating blocs. Negotiators within the African Group or SIDS, for example, could not meet in person to prepare their positions. Moreover, the digital divide in those regions further added to challenges of remote coordination since it was often not possible to meet online due to a lack of reliable technical infrastructure. Negotiators were characteristically stretched for capacity, contending with competing demands on their time when attending preparatory meetings online rather than in person. This was reinforced by the limited number of technical experts within Global South delegations, with many negotiators having to prepare for and coordinate on multiple negotiation topics compared to larger and better resourced delegates from the Global North. Moreover, interviewees also highlighted how some key experts from the Global South became ill or even passed away due to COVID-19, further impacting their already limited capacity.

Global South negotiators often rely on CSOs for technical support and policy analysis in the run-up to negotiations, but this was also weakened during the pandemic as in-person consultations and planning meetings with CSOs were harder to arrange. Many Global North countries, on the other hand, came out of COVID much quicker due to better health infrastructure and higher vaccination rates. This, combined with their better internet connectivity and digital infrastructure, meant that they were better able to prepare in the run-up to COP26. These challenges in preparation exacerbated already existing power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South, leaving negotiators from some Global South countries much less prepared to advocate for their interests.

Going beyond capacity, a number of our interviewees also highlighted how Global North countries have much more influence over the negotiation process and outcomes. For example, LDCs are dependent on the Global North for official development assistance (ODA), which became even more critical during the pandemic. This makes such countries more susceptible to pressures from the Global North to align with their agendas, and more vulnerable to compromised ODA if they do not align. For example, interviewees highlighted instances where, if a Global South country disagreed very strongly with the position of a Global North country, the Global North superiors and ministers would call their counterpart in the Global South to induce them to shift their position. Countries in the Global South would in these cases face pressure to comply so as not to risk aid or trade relations, which underscores the extent to which the underlying power dynamics that extend beyond the UNFCCC affect the negotiations.

Thus, it is worth elaborating briefly on some of the existing power dynamics that interviewees highlighted as underpinning the climate regime. Interviewees also highlighted how the “divide and conquer” strategy has been used in the past, with Global North countries targeting certain Global South countries dependent on them to shift their agendas and create division within Global South negotiating blocs. As such, ensuring that Global South countries are aligned in their interests and able to stand together, such as through the Group of 77 (G77) and China, is critical for navigating these power dynamics. Similarly, interviewees also highlighted that the Global North has much more access to and capacity to engage with the media, and therefore ends up setting the narrative of the negotiations. This pushes Global South countries into a reactive stance, adding more pressure on them to agree and comply with Global North positions, as they are often painted by the media as stalling progress if they do not. Interviewees also stated that the UNFCCC secretariat itself has a double standard when it comes to what does and does not count as “consensus” within the negotiations, with larger and more powerful countries often having much more influence over the final text than less powerful countries.

The pandemic not only reinforced these existing power inequalities, but also further compromised trust between the Global North and the Global South, particularly as a result of vaccine inequality. Interviewees highlighted that even though the pandemic constituted a global threat that directly impacted the citizens of the Global North, making it in their own interest to ensure equitable, global vaccine access, these countries were nonetheless seen to prioritize corporate interests. This has

made many Global South governments question the extent to which they can expect to receive support when it comes to increasing climate impacts, as well as the extent to which they can expect the Global North to mitigate their own emissions. The failure to meet the USD 100 billion target of climate finance by 2020 also added to the lack of trust, particularly as Global North countries were able to mobilize large amounts of finance very quickly for a COVID-19 response. Given these concerns about the Global North's weak commitment to global climate cooperation, negotiators from the Global South have resolved to push all the more forcefully for the adaptation and loss and damage support they are able to secure within the negotiations.

These power dynamics and weakened trust in the context of the pandemic also directly impacted the outcomes of COP26. A number of interviewees highlighted that climate finance itself was impacted by the pandemic. They highlighted how the diversion of funds towards pandemic responses and the dependence of the Global South on the Global North for health aid and vaccine access led to less dissemination of climate finance (both because the funds were diverted as well as because Global South countries who needed aid were not in a position to push hard for climate finance). In addition, the pandemic led to a much higher presence of the corporate sector from the Global North at COP26, with fewer CSOs from the Global South able to participate to combat and challenge those interests or present an alternative narrative. This contributed, for example, to a very prominent net-zero framing at COP26, alongside much more focus being placed on phasing down coal specifically, which Global South countries remain dependent upon, compared to oil and gas, which continue to trend upward in the Global North.

5. Recommendations for a more resilient UNFCCC process

Our findings indicate that there are fundamental procedures and institutional structures within the UNFCCC that are limiting the extent to which climate negotiations are just and equitable, and that these inequalities were reinforced and exacerbated during the pandemic. However, the pandemic also highlighted that societal power relations outside of the climate regime permeate the negotiations themselves, and that the negotiations can never be truly equitable within the context of those power dynamics. Therefore, we recommend immediate and near-term steps that the UNFCCC can take to enhance resilience, but then also reflect on how broader power relations need to shift in order for the negotiation process to be truly equitable.

5.1 Short-term measures that the UNFCCC can take to advance greater resilience within the existing process

Our interviews indicate that, during the pandemic, negotiators and observers – especially from the Global South – faced obstacles to meaningful inclusion, participation and representation in climate negotiation spaces. The interviewees suggested several measures that could be implemented in the short term to make the UNFCCC process more inclusive, on the basis of funding, technical capacity and logistics.

Funding

As noted earlier, the UNFCCC has a supplementary trust fund that funds two delegates per party to UNFCCC conferences. As of July 2022, the trust fund amounted to USD 7 894 592 (UNFCCC, 2022). The eligibility criteria are that parties have a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita less than USD 14 000, are a Small Island Developing State, or a Bureau member whose GDP per capita is less than USD 18 000 (UNFCCC, 2017). Global South negotiators noted in their interviews that the current system limits the opportunities for parties who need support but do not meet the eligibility criteria. Moreover, two delegates per party is simply insufficient to engage effectively in the negotiations,

putting developing countries' delegations at a considerable disadvantage in relation to larger and well-resourced developed countries' delegations. In addition, the current trust fund mechanism is not open to fund observer participation.

Interviewees suggested that the trust fund needs to be more flexible. The UNFCCC needs to reform and reassess the eligibility criteria and purpose of the trust fund. Some measures that could be taken in the short term include:

- Opening a discussion on a clause to use the trust fund to fund observer participation from underrepresented groups.
- Using the fund to enhance the quality of network connectivity for the Global South participants who need it.
- Using the fund to build further on existing efforts by the UNFCCC in response to the pandemic, such as supporting and building a regional hub for the intersessional and South–South discussions on climate negotiations similar to the Africa Hub in the May–June 2021 SBs.

Interviewees highlighted that the costs of travel and logistics (e.g. accommodation) posed barriers for participants, especially from the Global South. The availability and affordability of accommodation could become a criterion for selecting COP venues.

Digital divide

One change in the UNFCCC process during the pandemic was that fully virtual and hybrid sessions took place for the first time. In a 2021 survey of 195 respondents (affiliated with observer organizations, parties, UN organizations, and others), 72% would welcome moving some or many parts of the UNFCCC process online in the future (Klein et al., 2021). However, as our interviewees pointed out, virtual meetings come with various challenges. While research suggests that parties at the SBs sometimes use the digital divide as an excuse to delay negotiations, the digital divide between countries does present a real challenge to equitable virtual negotiations. One measure that was implemented to some extent but could be made more systematic and widespread is the distribution of prepaid internet enabled mobile phones and SIM cards to observer organizations to help with some of the bandwidth and electricity access issues.

Meeting logistics

A UNFCCC representative noted that in applying for attendance and side event participation at COPs as observers, indigenous groups often struggle to complete such processes (e.g. due to poorer connectivity or obstacles to submitting documents on time). The UNFCCC, through strengthening efforts with the Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform (LCIPP) and other constituency groups, should provide direct support for these organizations to enhance their engagement in the negotiation process.

There is also a need to expand the physical and virtual space for observers and advisors from the Global South to influence climate negotiations. At the COPs, pavilions and side events are key spaces for CSO and government engagement outside of the negotiation rooms. At COP26, governments and CSOs have pointed to exorbitant prices of setting up pavilions: for example, the total cost of the pavilion for a European intergovernmental organization was around EUR 150 000 (for 100 m²), which was a third more than at COP25 in Madrid (Hodgson & Hook, 2021). This makes pavilion space inaccessible to poorer countries or CSOs with smaller budgets. Providing one pavilion space per observer constituency could help create dedicated space for these organizations.

Inclusion also must go beyond the conference rooms to protest sites and the broader sphere of influence during COPs and SBs: CSOs have voiced their concerns on meaningful participation at COP27 based a statement from the Egyptian Prime Minister implying that the authorities would not tolerate protests outside of their government-designated areas (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

5.2 Longer-term changes to the UNFCCC process that can enhance resilience

Moving beyond shorter-term measures to enhance inclusion, participation and representation within the climate negotiations, our research also indicates that there are several barriers to equitable negotiations that are institutional in nature and embedded within the design of UNFCCC processes and procedures themselves. Ensuring procedural justice in the longer term therefore necessitates a critical examination of these structures, in order to consider how they need to transform to enhance equity overall. Here, we draw on the relevant literature and our interviews to provide recommendations for the longer-term equity and resilience of the negotiations along three key dimensions: access, power dynamics and procedures.

Access to negotiations

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges for observers and negotiators from the Global South owing to disparities in vaccination access, challenges in obtaining visas, shifting travel requirements and high accommodation costs, particularly for the several countries on the UK red list. In the longer term, the UNFCCC could help tackle some of these barriers by using visa considerations to guide the selection of future COP venues, with more COPs held in countries in the Global South where visa requirements are less restrictive.

Moreover, our interviews also revealed that funding support from the Global North to delegates from the Global South to enable them to attend the negotiations or enhance their capacity has at times been used as leverage over Global South negotiators and utilized to influence their position within the negotiations. In addition to providing more support to Global South negotiators from the trust fund, the UNFCCC could also mandate that all support from the Global North is to be solely pooled at the level of the trust fund, so that there is no attribution of where support is coming from and no scope for undue bilateral influence.

Our interviewees also revealed that COVID-19 further exacerbated challenges of internal coordination between negotiating blocks. The UNFCCC could therefore also provide financial support to set up more regional hubs in the Global South, where countries could meet for the purposes of coordination and preparation for negotiations in the run-up to COPs, and which could be organized around the regional “climate weeks”, along with more regular, funded engagement. Linked to this, interviewees have also highlighted how the arrangement of holding COP in different countries and venues could be restructured, to cut down administrative costs that could be utilized to improve the current processes. UNFCCC can initiate efforts to set up regional hubs as the permanent venues of COP with annual rotation.

Influence of geopolitical power in negotiations

Our interviewees highlighted how negotiators from the Global North have wielded their broader geopolitical power to influence the negotiations, in some cases even prevailing directly upon higher-level officials of certain countries from the Global South to have negotiators who disagreed with their position removed. Similarly, they also highlighted how trade relationships and the aid dependency of countries from the Global South on those from the Global North also affects their bargaining power and the extent to which they can advocate for their position, and conversely affects the extent of leverage Global North countries can bring to bear on those in the Global South. Going forward, the UNFCCC – or a broader UN body – could play a role in establishing procedures or codes of conduct to ensure that climate negotiations are not affected by these external linkages (Tomlinson, 2016). Such practices necessitate greater oversight of the UNFCCC as a neutral body to ensure that geopolitical power dynamics do not permeate the negotiations, and that all parties are given an equal voice in these processes. This would also ensure greater resilience of the negotiations to future external global crises.

Procedures of negotiations

Finally, the procedures that determine how the negotiations themselves are conducted could also be transformed to enable more equitable processes in the longer term. Several interviewees, for example, highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic further restricted already limited observer access and participation within the negotiations, such as by introducing restrictions on the number of observers that could enter negotiating rooms at COP26. The currently ongoing UNFCCC process to enhance observer access is an important step towards ensuring that the voices of observers, particularly from the Global South, are represented. In addition to enhancing observer access, it is critical that observers be allowed avenues to make substantive inputs to the process in the form of interventions or submissions. This is of special importance given that climate negotiators often represent the voices of the elite, and do not always account for the views of particularly marginalized groups within countries. Interviewees representing vulnerable groups in the Global South put forth examples of how their national governments used the pandemic as an excuse to not gather input from local communities when designing their enhanced NDCs, citing their inability to connect digitally with these communities. Ensuring that these communities are represented through observers is therefore critical to making sure their voices are heard at the negotiations.

In order to enhance representation of these marginalized groups, a mandate for negotiators to conduct national and local level consultations in advance of every COP should be discussed, with a report summarizing the inputs from the consultations to be submitted to the secretariat. This would better ensure that vulnerable and marginalized communities who are unable to be physically present at COPs are still able to provide input on and influence the negotiation process.

Our interviewees also reported the differences in capacity between the Global North and Global South, with countries from the Global South often having smaller delegation sizes and/or fewer technical staff, reducing their ability to effectively engage (Schroeder et al., 2012). A longer-term measure by the UNFCCC to level the playing field could include introducing caps on delegation sizes. More importantly, this could be paired with training for negotiators from the Global South to enable them to equip more negotiators to engage effectively at a more technical level.

In addition, one Global South bloc negotiator highlighted that the English and French linguistic capacities of negotiators greatly influence their participation and effectiveness in negotiation. A representative from the UNFCCC highlighted the difficulty in providing translation facilities for all meetings – especially informal sessions where multiple discussions may be taking place at the same time. In addition to enhancing translation capability where possible and establishing more comprehensive rules regarding translation availability, the UNFCCC could invest in training English speaking negotiators and advisors from the Global South.

One other aspect of the negotiations that has been criticized is the approach of consensus-based decision-making, requiring all parties to agree on decisions. While on the surface this appears to be more equitable, it has historically led to a watering down of commitments, and has been used strategically by certain key actors to block progress (Vihma, 2015; Vogel, 2014). Going forward, the UNFCCC could therefore also consider implementing majority voting rather than consensus to agree on decisions (Schroeder et al., 2012; Tomlinson, 2016).

5.3 Going beyond the negotiation spaces: shifting power within the UNFCCC process requires shifting power in general

As many of our respondents noted, the power imbalances and inequities that impact climate diplomacy reflect the power imbalances and inequities that exist outside the climate diplomacy space. Scholars have outlined how racial and colonial legacies impact climate governance and action on climate change (Abimbola et al., 2021; Perry, 2021; Sultana, 2021; Wilkens & Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022). This poses the question, what can we do to shift these power dynamics outside

the climate negotiations so that racial and colonial legacies in the climate negotiation space have less of an impact on negotiation outcomes?

A full and substantive discussion of the origins and impacts of the deep systemic power inequalities in international geopolitics is beyond the scope of this working paper. In this paper we discuss the interactions between broader systemic power inequalities and the climate regime to the extent that they arose in our interviews with stakeholders. For instance, the digital divide, electricity access and passport privilege issues that the Global South routinely faces were brought into the climate diplomacy space and severely exacerbated by the pandemic. However, as Sultana (2022) noted, the global climate negotiations are spaces that simultaneously reinforce climate colonialism and allow for the emergence of decolonial action. We therefore present a few specific ideas that could begin to tackle the shifting of broader power inequalities through the climate regime. This discussion only looks at a small part of the role that power imbalances play in climate outcomes and is in no way intended to be a comprehensive set of solutions to addressing the role of power disparities in the climate crisis.

Building allyship for Global South concerns in the Global North

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing power disparities between the Global North and Global South. This impacted the capacity of the Global South to attend the negotiations, to prepare for the negotiations, to represent individual country interests at the UNFCCC and to effectively define and work towards their desired outcomes at COP26. For future climate negotiations to be truly equitable, the power systems creating the inequities underpinning the disparities within the climate regime would need to be addressed. In the long term, working towards equitable solutions for the climate crisis benefits both the Global North and the Global South. The problem is that even in democratic countries, political positions are usually driven by short-term interests (Spurling, 2020). The power disparity between the Global North and the Global South means that Global South countries can offer very few short-term incentives to Global North countries. Global North negotiating positions are therefore aligned to the short-term interests of their own citizens. For instance, a climate advisor we interviewed noted that after the 2008 financial crisis, Global North negotiators were less generous with climate finance because their constituents' support for aid to foreign countries was even lower when they were facing financial hardships.

Bridging inequality gaps has historically required pressure from below (van Bavel & Scheffer, 2021). Therefore, a critical step in bridging the power divide at the negotiations is building allyship for Global South concerns among communities in the Global North, so that these concerns are not consistently pushed aside in times of crisis.

One way to do this is through networks of CSOs. One of the strengths of the UNFCCC process is that there is extensive civil society participation. At the climate negotiations, CSOs from the Global North and South are given opportunities and space to meet, share ideas and build coalitions. These CSOs have strong ties to communities on the ground in their own home countries, as well as a shared goal of addressing the climate crisis and a generally well-informed understanding of the impacts and disruptions of ongoing climate change. One of the ways to build "people power" against the inequalities between countries within the climate regime is to establish broad-based initiatives of Global North CSOs in partnership with Global South CSOs to raise awareness around Global South issues and build recognition and support within their own Global North countries and among their own policymakers and delegations for key climate regime objectives of countries from the Global South. Often when offering allyship to disadvantaged groups, advantaged groups do so on the condition that their own interests and status are maintained. For instance, even though many Global South CSOs faced difficulties in attending COP26, Global North CSOs turned up in full force. Allyship between Global North and Global South CSOs needs to go beyond notional support. To be effective, Global North CSOs need to offer their own resources in communicating support for social change and offer autonomy-oriented support to Global South CSOs even at the cost of sacrificing their own privilege.

Reforming research spaces

Limited research and technical capacity in the Global South leaves Global South delegations unable to engage as effectively with the negotiations as their Global North counterparts and highly dependent on research done by Global North institutions. Often their own delegations are advised by Global North researchers/policy experts. To build research and technical capacity in the Global South and ensure that Global South interests are adequately represented in the climate research and knowledge that informs the UNFCCC process, there is a need to increase access, resources, and the prominence of climate-related research in the Global South, and to simultaneously decolonize how research is defined and conducted in the Global North.

Increasing access: hold academic conferences and workshops in the Global South rather than the Global North to deal with visa and financial access issues

For most of the Global North, the pandemic is effectively over, and travel is returning to normal. More and more in-person meetings and conferences are taking place. However, while researchers and policymakers from the Global North can travel at short notice (since they either do not require visas or have minimal visa barriers to entering countries), it is not so simple for people in the Global South. Many Global South countries still have not fully vaccinated their populations. Moreover, consulate closures, a backlog of visa applications and understaffing of consulates in the Global South as a result of the pandemic have made getting visas a more tedious, expensive and lengthy process (Pai, 2022). At the UN organized, Stockholm+50 conference in June, many participants from Africa were unable to attend due to delays in visa processing (Lo, 2022). Getting proof of vaccination or meeting testing requirements to enter countries is also adding to the complexity of travel (Pai, 2022).

Albayrak-Aydemir (2020) documented the wide range of costs and missed research and career opportunities for passport-holders from the Global South. She offered several valuable suggestions towards fixing this problem, including:

- Organizing events in countries that do not have harsh or cumbersome visa requirements or high currency values.
- Booking reasonably priced venues in cities with a range of accommodation options for various budgets when organizing events.
- Offering online attendance and presentation opportunities to those who cannot travel as well as building more academic platforms and opportunities online.

However, it is important to ensure that introducing online attendance does not result in online attendance being the default for the Global South while their Global North counterparts participate in person, as there are many advantages to being able to meet in person.

The cultural norms, research practices and knowledge systems that inform the UNFCCC process largely originated in the Global North (Wilkins & Datchoua-Tirvaudey, 2022). This has meant that climate governance so far has focused on techno-economic solutions to the climate crisis, and when dealing with climate justice has predominantly focused on how to distribute the costs and benefits of climate action and inaction in a just manner. To go beyond that and capture local practices and the hidden impacts of climate action and inaction, Wilkins & Datchoua-Tirvaudey (2022) argue that, in addition to increasing Global South participation in and access to existing research spaces, there is a need to decolonize research and open up existing research spaces to diverse ways of knowing and thinking about human–climate interactions.

6. Conclusion: achieving resilience

Our findings indicate that global geopolitical dynamics strongly influence international climate policy and the equity of the climate regime. This is not only due to the intersectional nature of climate impacts but also due to external aid dependencies, trade relations and other disparities between countries permeating the power dynamics within the negotiations. Trust between countries has also been impacted by the response to global crises, such as the inequitable vaccine access during COVID-19 and the Ukraine war (Bennhold & Tankersleuy, 2022). For example, developing countries have noted rising expenditure on military support to Ukraine, as well as large amounts of finance mobilized for the COVID-19 response in the Global North, while climate finance continues to fall short (Hersher, 2022). At the same time, sanctions are leading to rising food prices, negatively impacting the Global South (Hensley & Gammelgård-Larsen, 2022), and finance is being shifted away from adaptation and development to deal with short-term emergencies (Hersher, 2022).

Going forward, there is a need to make climate negotiations more resilient to current and future global crises so that unequal geopolitical power dynamics do not militate against equitable negotiation outcomes. Interviewees suggested that resilience could come from recognizing that these multiple crises have the same root cause: for example, the Ukraine war is largely funded by and propped up by fossil fuels. Similarly, vaccine inequality has been the result of several large companies blocking equitable vaccine access. Highlighting the global power dynamics at the root cause of every global crisis could help focus attention on power dynamics within the climate negotiations and create the context for greater solidarity and joint action. Other options include large-scale accountability movements, including harnessing and building up anti-colonial movements through NGOs in the Global North that can raise awareness and motivate citizens to hold their governments accountable and address the root causes of unequal power dynamics. Building narratives and processes that draw the connections between climate change and systems of power can highlight solutions that help address both, and avoid outcomes that are in interest of the powerful, while only exacerbating the climate crisis.

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