



#4 - How multilateralism can more effectively enable action on climate change

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hosted by FOGGS President Richard Kinley

HOW MULTILATERALISM CAN MORE EFFECTIVELY ENABLE ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

A FOGGS Open Consultation Discussion Note

by the Moderator

Richard Kinley, FOGGS President

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND DISCLAIMER

The fourth in the series of *FOGGS Open Consultation Mondays* (20 January 2025) focused on the topic "How multilateralism can more effectively enable action on climate change". Hosted /moderated by **FOGGS** President Richard Kinley, participants discussed the challenges of climate multilateralism and the need for stronger action by governments and for partnerships with businesses, civil society and academia to significantly advance implementation of existing agreements and commitments made by various actors. The meeting recording is available on [FOGGS' Youtube channel](#), while this note serves as an analytical recap (available on the dedicated [FOGGS Open Consultation Mondays web page](#)).

This discussion note, prepared under the responsibility of the consultation moderator, endeavours to reflect and advance some of the points discussed with a view to:

- Contributing to ongoing debate on how multilateralism can more effectively enable action on climate change;
- Encouraging interested governments and international organisations to consider and even act on some of the ideas;
- Promoting further study of options to enhance actions by governments and non-state actors.

Key points made:

- Traditional climate multilateralism has delivered important outcomes but is reaching the limits of effectiveness as governments are not implementing commitments sufficiently.
- The time has come to turn away from the prevailing normative approaches and focus on real results, even if this means agreements among limited sets of key actors.
- Self-interested action by governments is the foundation of problem solving, but it can, and should, be facilitated by multilateral cooperation.
- International organisations other than UNFCCC have important roles to play in acting to reduce emissions and build adaptation capacity (IMO, ICAO, FAO).
- Need to boost progressive forces in countries, within governments and in civil society, so that fossil fuel and other vested interests do not prevail.
- Resort to litigation, whether grounded in national or international law, should be further exploited to press for change.
- The role of financing is crucial for the green transformation and for support to developing countries. There were several references to the role of multilateral development banks, and the need for change in this regard. Effecting such change would require the stronger engagement of leading governments.

The interpretation of statements made and the conclusions drawn here are those of the moderator and no consensus among participants should be assumed.

¹ Approximately 35 experts from the climate negotiation world and academia, as well as experts in multilateralism and climate policy implementation, participated in the Open Consultation.

What is ‘climate multilateralism’?

The underlying sentiment among most participants was a shared frustration about current misunderstandings, and even mischaracterisations, of what was referred to as “climate multilateralism”, a term meant to capture not only the UNFCCC process but other international organisations, processes and cooperation vehicles dealing with the climate emergency.

The limitations of climate multilateralism

Several participants referred to the successes of climate multilateralism over the last 30 years. Reference was made to the adoption of 3 important climate treaties, as well as to the principles, norms and goals that had been established and the processes and systems under the treaties. The global spread of public and private sector awareness, interest and (admittedly incomplete) understanding of climate change as a result of the UNFCCC process was emphasised. The widespread adoption of climate laws, net zero goals and, in places, policies aimed at boosting green technologies was also emphasised, even if these remain inadequate. Moreover, it was pointed out that while highly insufficient to date, the implementation of the agreements has lowered greenhouse gas (GHG) growth rates and global temperature change projections. In sum, **climate multilateralism has delivered – but not enough!**

As with other multilateral processes, **there comes a time when general or universal multilateral approaches focussing on principles, norms and goals must give way to more targeted and focussed initiatives, often involving limited numbers of key actors, to engender real results.** In the case of climate change, “real results” means:

- reducing GHG emissions,
- building adaptation capacity and
- delivering finance to support developing countries in the above two activities.

This could be described as the “implementation imperative” and is not a strong suit of multilateralism. Certainly, in the climate domain implementation can only be lamented as completely insufficient, with some countries even backtracking.

Impressive COPs – underwhelming outcomes

A number of participants underlined the continuing importance of the UNFCCC process and of its Conference of the Parties (COP), in particular as periodic stock-taking and accountability moments, as well as in helping to generate momentum towards, and supporting, climate action and loss and damage funding. However, there was also considerable frustration expressed with the explosion in the scale of COPs in recent years, without any concomitant explosion in action, as well as the misperception/mischaracterisation of the events as “save the world” moments, which have resulted in decisions that are heavy on rhetoric and long-termism and short on impact.

Multilateralism is fundamentally about governments using international cooperation and agreements to help them address/solve cross-boundary problems over which they do not have direct or full control. They thus try to protect their interests (including for example their interest in protection from severe climate change related disruptions but also competitiveness concerns), and to enable more ambitious domestic action than would otherwise be possible. Thus, domestic (or regional) policy formulation and implementation by governments is the foundation of problem-solving, albeit it often facilitated by multilateral cooperation.

Options to enhance climate multilateralism

Several options for enhanced multilateral cooperation were raised and discussed during the consultation. A few such options currently exist in some form, while others are still at the conceptual stage. An underlying point was that the focus needs to shift from general international agreements to promoting and facilitating government action/initiatives that actually reduce emissions, build adaptation capacity and deliver funding. Further work on all such options is encouraged, as is the development of further options.

The option of further **universal agreements** was set aside as not necessary and not productive due to the compromises necessary to bring everyone on board. There is also no support among governments for such an approach at the moment. Moreover, UNFCCC business-as-usual, whereby soft COP decisions are hotly debated and then not implemented, was found wanting.

Mention was made of possible improvements to the **UNFCCC** process, in particular with regard to strengthening the mechanisms surrounding accountability. As mentioned above, reduction in size of COPs was seen as appropriate, with more focus on implementation. Smaller COPs would make possible a more agile process and enable smaller countries to host. Reference was also made to process reform, such as agenda streamlining, in order to increase relevance and effectiveness.

It was noted that **other international organisations** have important roles to play in acting to reduce emissions and build adaptation capacity (IMO, ICAO, FAO). However, this was not elaborated and would benefit from further analysis.

There was a wide-ranging discussion around the theme of **action-oriented agreements or understandings on specific issues** involving limited numbers of countries. Such agreements would indeed be focussed and detailed, with deliverables at national level. They could address action in particular sectors (e.g. cement, steel, motor vehicles) or identifiable issues (e.g. methane emissions, promotion of renewables, deforestation/reforestation). Some models exist (Climate Club, Breakthrough Agenda, various COP presidency initiatives) although the results of these are as yet hard to define. Nevertheless, this model was thought by several participants

to be best suited to the current situation and should be advanced by interested countries, especially those who can be seen as the “key players” in a given field. Further analysis of variations on the model were also encouraged.

Possible subject areas mentioned included economic sectors such as renewable energy generation; steel, cement or vehicle production; methane emissions reduction, especially in the energy sector; and de/re-forestation. One of the key objectives of such initiatives, aside from reducing emissions, would be to establish **new markets** and **new economic realities** by bringing down green production costs so that fossil fuel options become too costly.

A number of questions were raised in this context that would benefit from further analysis and consideration:

- How (and if) such initiatives could or should be linked into the UNFCCC process, with reference made to the climate champions, reporting/accountability arrangements, and profiling at COPs;
- Whether some element of legal bindingness of such arrangements would help with delivery or lead to weaker undertakings and less participation;
- How could continuity or follow-through be encouraged, especially what role could designating secretariats with ongoing responsibilities play in this regard (with links to critical questions of accountability and monitoring);
- How could industrial and trade-related competitiveness issues be managed and how could advantages in new and rising industries be promoted without falling back onto protectionism.

There would be several challenges in advancing such approaches. Given current geopolitical realities, the main one would clearly be the overt hostility of the world’s largest economic power. However, as the USA increasingly “goes rogue”, there are also arguments for the “rest of the world” to define its own new reality. Critical in this regard will be the reaction of the EU and of China, with both giving reason for some anxiety (e.g. anti-Green reactionaries in the EU, growing coal power in China).

Two other options were also identified as being worth advancing and studying, although of a different character to the options above. The first was the promotion of deliberate efforts and initiatives to **boost progressive forces** in countries, within governments and in civil society, so that fossil fuel and other vested interests do not prevail. This could be achieved partly through more positive messaging about what has been achieved through the multilateral regime and domestic action so far. It was noted by several participants that “doom and gloom” messages about the severity of the climate crisis do not seem to be gaining much traction. Secondly, the power of **litigation**, whether grounded in national or international law, should be further exploited to press for change. Questions would however be raised about the effect of international law-based litigation or initiatives as the rules-based order is now in danger. Action by civil society in national legal systems may be more productive in generating action.

The final, and critical, point related to financing for the low-carbon transformation and for support to developing countries. The importance of this conversation was stressed; however, identification of concrete options was limited. There were several references to the role of multilateral development banks, and the need for change in this regard. Effecting such change would require the stronger engagement of leading governments.