

# UNFCCC PRESIDENCY: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN PREPARING THE UNFCCC NEGOTIATIONS

The Presidency is at the centre of preparing and setting objectives for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations. The Presidency has the primary responsibility to consider the 'how' of the negotiations, i.e., managing the preparatory phase and the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) summit itself.

The government of the country hosting the COP coordinates many key actors. Internally, this includes technical experts on climate change from ministries and executive agencies and climate change negotiators. External key actors include the UNFCCC secretariat, a potential Co-Presidency held by another nation, UNFCCC parties, academic experts and non-national stakeholders.

While our recommendations are also applicable to future presidencies, this policy brief focuses on the United Kingdom Presidency of COP26.

## POSTPONEMENT OF COP26 DUE TO COVID-19 REQUIRES DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

The physical distancing required to safeguard health during the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacts the UK's ability to host high-level international negotiations crucial and time-critical to advance global climate action. The cancellation of the UNFCCC June 2020 conference in Bonn (SB/SBSTA/SBI) and the postponement of COP26 by one year to November 2021 were necessary in reaction to Covid-19, especially with regards to the related travel restrictions and the need to prevent overwhelming healthcare systems in least developed and developing countries as negotiators return to their home countries. New approaches, including combining digital with in-person diplomacy, are needed to maintain and increase the momentum towards delivering on the objectives of

- a) Finalizing the Paris Rulebook,
- b) Increasing ambition in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and
- c) Moving towards the implementation and monitoring phase of the Paris Agreement with stronger inclusion of civil society, cities, businesses and experts.

The UNFCCC started experimenting in smaller discussion sessions on sub-committees with the use of online/video-conferencing software to continue technical work and maintain momentum in June and November 2020 in the form of "Climate Change Dialogues". This new form of 'digital diplomacy' offers numerous benefits and challenges.

### The benefits of digital diplomacy in the form of virtual negotiations include:

- a) **Reduced carbon emissions** and costs from travelling to and attending conferences;
- b) **Increased inclusiveness and transparency** by allowing more negotiators and observers from small developing/least developed countries, including the interested

public, to attend who would not have the financial resources or visa access otherwise;

- c) **Time-efficiency** due to saved travel time; and,
- d) **Health benefits for those who would have attended** in terms of reduced exposure to Covid-19, other viruses/bacteria and jet lag.

**There are several challenges and potential limitations of digital diplomacy, these include:**

- a) The **lack of in-person trust building** and informal conversations between negotiation parties to find 'common landing zones';
- b) **Increased potential for misunderstanding** and misjudging situations due to the chair's/other negotiator's inability to recognise signalling through body language (Kurtzberg et al. 2009);
- c) **Impeding of language inclusiveness** as some participants require simultaneous translation;
- d) **Physical access can be impeded as some negotiators and observers lack stable internet connections with sufficient bandwidth;**
- e) **The lack of a dedicated negotiating space** as negotiators working from home or home offices have to deal with day-to-day work or other matters that they are more able to leave behind when they are "away" at negotiations;
- f) **Reduction of pressure toward agreement** as frequently, deals are struck after nights of negotiations when the presidency and group pressure make clear to negotiators that they will not be able to leave until an agreement is found, with the ability of negotiators to spontaneously approach each other to explore compromise options crucial to progress (Smeets 2015);
- g) The benefits of reducing emissions from avoided travel may be lower than intuitively expected considering **the increased online activities and their electricity requirements**, which are predominantly met by fossil fuels.

**RECOMMENDATIONS** in the presence of COVID-19 and related travel restrictions, the challenges can be addressed through these measures:

- a) **Step-up the use of non-verbal communication tools** through chat or hand-raise functions on e.g., Zoom virtual conferencing software;
- b) **Get agreement that delegates will switch on cameras** and use "speaker view" in online platform;
- c) **Provide simultaneous translation.** Upgrade virtual conference platforms to allow for channels with simultaneous translation into UN languages during sessions that would usually offer simultaneous translation;
- d) Improve connectivity. Identify options to improve internet access for parties and observers by, e.g., using travel funds dedicated to participating in physical UNFCCC conferences to rent a local hotel room with adequate internet access or upgrading home office space;
- e) Get agreement on firm deadlines. Some of the deadline pressure could be replicated via online platforms through setting scheduling limitations and deadlines for the negotiation groups and well-planned facilitation that includes breakout rooms to discuss compromise solutions in small groups of key negotiators;
- f) Use advantages of Zoom to make progress on these sub-negotiation topics by meeting in sub-groups and break-out rooms with the relevant negotiators;
- g) Replicate trust-building encounters through randomised small break-out rooms to discuss contentious issues on breaks and encourage negotiators to reach out and set up private Zoom coffee chat meetings.

## USE OF ADDITIONAL PHYSICAL AND/OR VIRTUAL INTERSESSIONAL MEETINGS

There is a tradition in the history of the UNFCCC to add week-long intersessional meetings to pre-negotiate issues to allow for additional time in order to complete negotiations in time for the COP. These week-long negotiations were held in addition to the annual Bonn Subsidiary Body meetings in late Spring, e.g., before and after COP-15 (2009/10) and before COP-21' approach

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- A) Check what the outstanding points are that require more time and additional discussions to resolve;
- B) Use the advantages of Zoom and other comparable platforms to make progress on these sub-negotiation topics by meeting in sub-groups and break-out rooms with the relevant negotiators.

### CONCLUSION

The postponement of COP26 due to the global Covid-19 crisis offers additional scope for experimenting with and developing digital diplomacy through online negotiations.

Central benefits of physical negotiations that cannot fully be replicated in online negotiations include spontaneous meetings that can result in new cooperation and solutions, trust building and deadline pressure among negotiators. There are options to mitigate some of the challenges for the duration of the pandemic in the absence of the option to hold physical negotiations.

Beyond the Covid-19 pandemic, online negotiations could become embedded into a 'hybrid' approach of physical and online UNFCCC negotiations. One central limitation of physical negotiations is finding the additional time required to make progress on a contentious negotiation sub-topic. Especially if the negotiators already know each other from physical negotiations and had a chance to build mutual trust, online negotiations can be a useful inter-sessional approach for gaining additional negotiation time to make progress on these contentious issues.

Virtual meetings can also offer opportunities to improve mentoring initiatives for new negotiators and to allow for regular mentoring interactions between experienced negotiators/chairs/presidency members and their successors ensuring a smooth transition.

## REFERENCES

Kurtzberg, T., Naquin, C. & Belkin, L. (2009). Humor as a relationship-building tool in online negotiations. *International Journal of Conflict Management* 20(4): 377-397.

Smeets, S. (2015). *Negotiations in the EU Council of Ministers: And All Must Have Prizes*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

This brief was produced as part of the Better Climate Governance project. For more information about the project, visit [www.betterclimategovernance.com](http://www.betterclimategovernance.com) or contact the team at [connect@betterclimategovernance.com](mailto:connect@betterclimategovernance.com) or [Katharine.rietig@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:Katharine.rietig@ncl.ac.uk).

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