

THE IMPACT OF PROCESS INNOVATIONS IN THE TECHNICAL DIALOGUE OF THE FIRST GLOBAL STOCKTAKE

Report: February 14, 2024

Christine Peringer, JD, Mediators Beyond Borders International
Katharine Rietig, Ph.D., Newcastle University

Introduction

Overview

The deliberations within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are arguably the most important discussions on the planet; yet, they take place within a slow, inefficient and often unsatisfying process. The Technical Dialogue (TD) of the first Global Stocktake (GST) under the Paris Agreement used a number of process innovations. This report looks at these innovations and their impact based on interviews with a sample of stakeholders as well as the authors' in-person observations. The innovations were generally well-received and our informants reported significant increases in the amount and kind of information exchanged among other positive impacts. A full participatory evaluation of the TD process would provide lessons that would aid in the design of the next GST and strengthen other UN dialogues.

Background

In 2015, the **Paris Agreement** (Article 14) created the GST, a process, taking place every five years, to assess collective progress towards achieving the agreement's goals. The purpose of the GST was to inform Parties so they can be more ambitious in their domestic actions, as well as in enhancing international cooperation for climate action. In December 2023, the Parties to the Paris Agreement concluded the first GST. The COP28 GST decision¹ is the clearest jointly developed report card on progress and prescription for action on the Paris Agreement.

A key component of the first GST was the **Technical Dialogues (TD)**. This was a three-part conversation (TD1.1 took place in Bonn in June 2022, TD1.2 in November 2022 at COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh and TD1.3 in June 2023, again in Bonn) in which Parties, experts and non-Party stakeholders (NPS) aimed to

develop a shared understanding, based on the best available scientific information, of progress in implementing the Paris Agreement and how gaps in the implementation can be bridged. Among other instruction, this was to be done in a flexible, facilitative, learning-by-doing manner involving Parties and NPS. The co-facilitators, Harald Winkler and Farhan Akhtar designed, led the process and documented the findings. In September 2023, they submitted a final Synthesis Report² to the Subsidiary Bodies to inform the work of the final, political phase of the GST which took place in Dubai at COP28.

To inform this report, we observed many hours of the TD, at all three sessions, spoke with a dozen stakeholders -- Parties, non-Party stakeholders and the TD leadership, representing Global South and North, four negotiating groups and five NPS constituencies. We share here the innovations that emerged as most significant and then describe their impact and provide guidance for preparing the next GST.

Key innovations

The co-facilitators took to heart their ‘facilitative’ and ‘learning-by-doing’ directives and made a number of innovations that had the impact of having more interactive discussions than many had experienced before in UNFCCC fora. Believing that you need to change the way people have discussions in order to change the outcome, the meetings were held in multiple formats (plenary, round tables, focused exchanges and World Cafés) some quite different from regular UNFCCC mandated processes. (See the TD Synthesis Report page 12 and 44 for details on these formats.) Here follow those innovations mentioned most often in our interviews.

1. Interactive and less formal exchanges.

The TD was designed to separate the technical from the political, a big challenge within the UN. One way this manifested was the repeated encouragement of delegates to speak from the heart, listen and respond directly to each other and not share prepared statements. While many delegates did deliver standard-format statements, especially in plenaries, our informants attributed this to a number of factors: habit, the large number of people listening (including sometimes online delegates), linguistic barriers for non-English speakers and the constraints of speaking for a collective (e.g. the G77 and China, or NPS constituency groups.) Given these challenges, it is noteworthy how many delegates did step into this informality.

2. Extensive use of small group processes.

Approximately a quarter of the scheduled meeting time within the Technical Dialogues was dedicated to small group discussion.³ Delegates considered this valuable, as shown by the many positive comments in the closing plenary. While some Parties and NPS expressed concern, at the outset, about the World Café – a process involving self-selected participation in a series of 30-minute discussions at small tables – the format proved very popular. Within the small groups, innovations included:

- a. **Freely mixing Party and NPS.** In the case of the World Cafés, because the physical table blocked view of name tags, sometimes it was hard to tell if a delegate was a Party or an NPS. This blurring of the lines allowed for a freer conversation. One concern raised, however, was that ideas were being noted in the World Café record without attribution. Some civil society used the small groups as an opportunity to protest, not engage in conversation. Another concern was people with specific business objectives may be tilting the conversation toward their financial gain. But in general, the reduced formality was welcomed by the Party delegates and the NPS with whom we spoke.
- b. **Moderation by skilled, mostly non-Party, facilitators.** Experienced facilitators guided the small group discussions. They held the speakers' list, checked for understanding, extracted key concepts, made connections, highlighted the progress in the discussion and encouraged full diverse participation in a style that was more directive than what is standard at UNFCCC meetings.
- c. **Use of focusing questions and personas.** The small groups were guided by questions to which participants were asked to respond. The questions were sometimes focused at the macro- and others at the micro-level. The World Café at TD1.3 asked participants at some tables to provide advice to a fictitious persona (a farmer, a bank president, etc.) to elicit a different kind of input.
- d. **Use of non-traditional spaces.** There were some unusual spaces chosen for the small groups, with the intention, by changing the venue, to change how people interact. Interesting that the most 'successful' World Cafés, in terms of people's satisfaction, were the first and the third ones, both of which took place in cafeterias, a naturally very informal setting.

3. Non-Party stakeholders participated in some of the formats on almost equal footing with Parties.

All those that we interviewed mentioned this as a primary way the TD process differed from traditional UNFCCC practice. NPS had a seat at the table and could share their views on equal footing with Parties at the World Cafés and the COP27 small table version of the Round Tables. As one put it, "Whether you were a country representative or an observer, you were valued in the same way." And even in some plenaries NPS were able to speak as representatives of their own organizations, and not just their constituency. While decisions in those large group spaces were still taken by Parties alone (so there was not full equality), the ability to speak was greatly opened up to NPS.

4. Use of visuals – posters, creative space (videos, plays, artwork) and graphic recording.

There was effort to move beyond documents and discussion through visual media including a call for posters -- a total of 80 posters were

received, with a large proportion coming from non-Party stakeholders. The TD used graphic recorders in a number of meetings to visually depict the discussions on large panels. At COP27 there was a showcase of 30 climate action creative projects where ideas were expressed through video and other media.

5. High level of communication and transparency by the co-facilitators in the meetings and beyond.

While not an innovation per se, none of the practices listed above would have had a positive impact, had they not been within a process led in a transparent, collaborative and flexible way. The co-facilitators created an open process including larger efforts (e.g., welcoming submissions at several points in the process, providing a searchable database of more than 1,800 documents, hosting online briefing and feedback events before each dialogue session, adjusting the process in response to feedback and preparing detailed summary reports after each session) to the smaller trust-building actions, for example, being available in the coffee area for any delegate to talk with them for 30 minutes before and after each plenary.

Impact of the Innovations

The innovations described above were credited with a host of positive impacts. Those mentioned most often were the following:

1. Open and often frank discussion.

Everyone reported having seen or experienced both Parties and NPS in open and frank conversation in ways they don't often see. As one former Party negotiator shared, "most often unfortunately people talk at or over one another or to themselves – the dialogue part is often missed." For instance, at the Focused Exchanges at COP27, some Parties gave prepared statements, but some responded to the opening presentations. One NPS reported having a detailed exchange with one of the Parties after her presentation which was very useful for both of them. Another noted an increase over the three sessions in the ability of Parties to enter into real dialogue as they got used to this new approach. One NPS was surprised at the level of sharing and said that the small group focusing questions turned the meeting into almost a brainstorming session, with people really responding to each other and refining each other's ideas.

2. Unprecedented exchange of detailed knowledge.

A process, in which Parties could discuss the latest scientific information and share their successes and vulnerabilities and in which NPS could participate almost as fully as Parties, allowed an unprecedented exchange of views. Inviting NPS to speak from their organization's specific expertise and not have it lost in a broader constituency statement had the impact of more useful information being shared by NPS. The ideas shared were

better understood due to the possibility of back-and-forth clarifying exchanges between the delegates. Even experienced Parties and NPS remarked on the high level of factual information they learned that they don't usually have the time to explore. The non-delegate facilitators contributed to the amount of information that could be shared as they often were more active than is traditional within the UNFCCC. We learned that delegates enjoyed the faster pace of exchange and the greater diversity of contribution created by this proactive facilitation style.

3. The establishment of new connections.

Many of the Parties and NPS we spoke with said that they made new personal connections that would serve their work beyond the TD. Delegates got to know each other and each other's concerns by being at the same small table and then were able to follow-up informally afterwards. We heard examples of Parties approaching other Parties for collaborative positioning on TD issues and NPS following up with Parties and other civil society members on newly discovered common concerns.

4. An increase in empathy and understanding between negotiators.

In the negotiating room there can be a lot of criticism of others and a tendency to stick to one's negotiating positions; but as one Party shared, when negotiators actually talk to each other as was possible in the small groups of the Technical Dialogue, they can have "a more empathetic conversation that's grounded more in a deeper understanding of what the realities we all face at home" crucial for the finding of consensus. More people spoke more deeply on topics than if the process had stayed in full-room discussion.

5. A refinement of how messages were delivered by Parties and NPS.

Parties and NPS told us that their primary goal, naturally, was still to articulate their views as clearly as possible so they would appear in the Summary Reports and then ultimately the Synthesis Report. But due to the greater understanding afforded by the TD innovations, even experienced Party negotiators told us that they had never been involved in a process before within the UN system and that had such a positive impact on their knowledge level, understanding of others' positions and action. This new understanding impacted how they spoke in the TD meetings and how they would present proposals in the future, now that they understood the others' contexts better.

6. Increased collaboration among Parties, between Parties and NPS and among NPS.

Parties reported an increased number of requests from other Parties for collaboration on contentious points. For some NPS, there was much increased cross-constituency dialogue and collaboration which participants attributed to the open conversations of the COP27 Round Tables and the World Cafés. NPS told us it provided unprecedented possibilities for

knowledge exchange and connection with Parties and other NPS. It was “a fabulous way to meet people” collaborating with whom would strengthen their on-going work.

7. A harmonious and productive series of meetings.

The co-facilitators’ strong communication and transparency with the delegates built confidence in their leadership and trust in the process. As a Party member put it, “Because Farhan and Harald have a ton of credibility and a lot of experience ... they were more in the driver’s seat ... which helped conversations not to break down.” Parties were willing to follow their lead, even on matters that did not have their full support. The Technical Dialogues concluded in harmony despite having had some hard and heated discussions. Arriving at the end with all parties still at the table and most expressing gratitude to the process is an important measure of success.

Guidance for changes in the next GST

1. Express more clearly the relationship of the TD process to its intended output.

Many said they were not clear on how the TD would relate to the final decision and how the various activities contributed to the best possible outcome. For instance, one NPS delegate focused on capacity building, found the TD more of a capacity building exercise itself, rather than taking stock of capacity building progress which he expected and would have preferred. Another told us that there was no clarity provided in advance on what would emerge from these, admittedly rich discussions. The TD was both assessing and at the same time trying to bring each other along to greater ambition and delegates were not always sure which focus to use.

2. Structure meetings so there is a clear handover between a completed TD before the political process starts.

The overlap of the scientific and political process of the GST in Bonn 2023 created some confusion. The Technical Dialogue was not yet complete and yet the High-level Committee was meeting to launch the political process that culminated at COP28.

3. Provide instruction on new formats, in advance, for optimal participation.

Because this was so unusual, it appeared that many NPS weren’t prepared for this unprecedented access to the microphone. Some were disappointed that not all constituencies contributed to the discussions even though they were in the room, while other individual NPS were able to step right into the conversation and share their organization’s views.

More clarity on the best possible outcome (see point 1 above) and how best to participate in the new formats would have benefited delegates.

4. Reduce Language Barriers.

English was the language of the TD. This made delivering unscripted statements and participating in small groups a challenge for delegates not fluent in English. It is harder to prepare when documents are only available in English. Parties and NPS raised this concern. Delegates managed with whisper translation but difficult room acoustics exacerbated this problem. Some delegates just withdrew from the meetings in frustration.

5. Greater investment in logistical support and planning.

Kudos to the small Secretariat team for arranging so many events and processes with relatively few glitches. And there were logistical challenges that presented barriers to full participation. Especially at COP27, the acoustics, inappropriate room size and layout, the numbers of people in small groups, the challenges in seating (having to drag heavy chairs into awkward circles) all reduced the efficacy of the small group work. More planning by and with the COP Presidency could have remedied this.

6. Develop/strengthen a global communication strategy to build awareness of the GST.

One delegate expressed disappointment that the GST as a whole was not in the news throughout the TD period. The stocktake in general terms is a relatively easy thing for the public to understand, even for a lay person. More could be done next time to communicate to the global public that this important assessment is happening.

7. Reassess the posters and creative space elements.

None of the Parties we spoke with had taken in the posters or creative space, though one thought that one poster (on tipping points) may have had an impact on some of the discussions. A few of the NPS had viewed the posters and one had created a poster. They welcomed this way of having the TD be a learning opportunity rather than just a discussion opportunity. Another speculated that it might be rewarding to see your work exposed in this way, but that not a lot of attention was paid to it so it is not the best use of everyone's energy. Some remarked on the graphic recording of some of the meetings – of those, some found them a useful high-level view of the proceedings and others found them not a good use of secretariat time and money, seeing them as fun for those in the room, but the images not translating well to documents or computer screens which is how most will try to see them. None of our dozen informants had taken in the creative space.

8. Conduct a full participatory evaluation in 2024 of the TD of the GST.

The UNFCCC Secretariat staff review events and identify what worked and what didn't so that they can improve for next time. This takes place primarily at the level of scheduling, use of rooms, complaints received and other logistics. The Secretariat or the UNFCCC as a whole does not have a practice of asking the bigger questions: Was this the best use of time and energy? What within our control would have enhanced outcomes? What was the experience of Parties and NPS? The UNFCCC needs to ask, what can be learned from our 'doing' at TD1 to improve how we organize the next Global Stocktake? A full evaluation engaging a large sample of stakeholders would allow the next GST to be even stronger than the first.

Conclusion

The co-facilitators of the Technical Dialogues produced a Synthesis Report -- a collectively arrived at assessment of progress since 2015 and pathways forward. The process gave voice -- orally, in writing and artistically -- to all stakeholders present. While never conceived as something that would be approved by consensus, the Synthesis Report was not challenged, so in that way it can be seen as being accepted by all Parties. The innovations of the Technical Dialogue allowed a very high level of participation and therefore legitimacy to the Synthesis Report, allowing it to be an accepted basis for the development of the first CMA GST decision. We believe this is the first time that a process involving significant use of small groups and with significant participation of NPS and opportunity for discussion between Parties, between Parties and NPS and between NPS became the basis of a UNFCCC political decision.

A full assessment of the efficacy of the standard negotiation process and innovative formats such as used in the TD would allow evidence-based evolution that would strengthen future UNFCCC deliberations and those of other UN negotiating bodies.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Conduct a formal participatory evaluation of the first GST process for use in planning the next GST or other dialogue processes.
2. Encourage reductions in formality that allow more sharing/hearing of the varied realities than is possible with prepared statements
3. Use small groups and other dialogue formats that support discussion with back-and-forth exchanges
4. Include non-Party Stakeholders on an equal footing with Parties in some meetings.
5. Use neutral, informed, experienced facilitators rather than delegates to hold the speakers' list, summarize and encourage participation.
6. Have skilled co-facilitators who engage with the delegates with a high degree of transparency and on-going communication.
7. Learn from the challenges of TD1:
 - i. Express more clearly the relation of the TD process to its intended output;
 - ii. Structure meetings so there is a clear handover between a completed TD before the political process starts.
 - iii. Provide instruction on new formats, in advance, for optimal participation;
 - iv. Reduce Language Barriers;
 - v. Invest more in logistical support and planning, especially regarding size of space, acoustics, seating, facilitation and recording
 - vi. Develop/strengthen a global communication strategy to build awareness of the GST;
 - vii. Reassess the posters and creative space elements.

References

1. Outcome of the first global stocktake. Draft decision -/CMA.5. FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/L.17 Retrieved from: <https://unfccc.int/documents/636608>.
2. Technical dialogue of the first global stocktake. Synthesis report by the co-facilitators on the technical dialogue. FCCC/SB/2023/9. Retrieved from: <https://unfccc.int/documents/631600>
3. Calculated based on 85 hours of scheduled TD meeting time with 23 of those hours being either World Cafés (11 hours) or the COP27 Round Tables in small-group format (12 hours.)
4. Peringer, C., Rietig, K. & Theys, S. (2021). Policy Brief #1 “Improving UNFCCC Negotiations with Facilitation/Mediation Approaches: A Toolkit.”
5. Rietig, K. (2019). Leveraging the Power of Learning for Effective Climate Governance. *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 21(3): 228-241.

This report was produced as part of the Better Climate Governance project. For more information about the project, visit www.betterclimategovernance.com or contact the team at admin@betterclimategovernance.com.

Citation: Peringer, C. and Rietig, K. (2024). The impact of process innovations in the Technical Dialogue of the first global stocktake. Retrieved from <https://betterclimategovernance.com>.