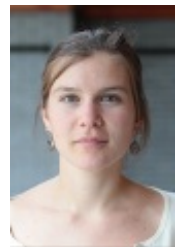


The latest UN Climate Change Conference in Warsaw highlighted the role that smaller states can play in negotiations

blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/12/11/the-latest-un-climate-change-conference-in-warsaw-highlighted-the-role-that-smaller-states-can-play-in-negotiations/

11/12/2013

*Climate change negotiations aimed at an eventual deal to replace the Kyoto Protocol have proved extremely challenging in recent years. **Federica Genovese** writes on the UN Climate Change Conference held in Warsaw last month. She argues that while a distinction is traditionally made between 'strong' and 'weak' states in negotiations, supposedly weaker states have far more capacity to shape decisions than is commonly recognised. This was apparent in Warsaw where the Philippines played a pivotal role in shaping the discussions.*



The Nineteenth Conference of the Parties (COP19) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Warsaw concluded on Saturday 23 November 2013. Once again, the negotiations followed what has become a tradition of strained corridor meetings and long overnight sessions culminating in subtle changes to the text that countries finally decided to support. The key goal of this COP was to foster progress towards a new climate agreement to be implemented in 2020 (i.e. the year the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol comes to an end).

As with every annual UNFCCC meeting, some countries came out of the conference feeling **betrayed by the institution**. Others instead left Poland with a half-smile, realising that they **won the main battles** over global mitigation and adaptation. Despite the fact that UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres claims that there are no winners or losers at these negotiations, the question still holds: who is most influential and who is not at these negotiations, and why?

With increasing knowledge and intensified media coverage of these meetings, we can attempt an answer to this question. For example, we know that the Philippines were able to shape the **discourse on several points** on the COP19 agenda, such as deforestation and technology transfers. Also, influentially, India blocked progress on **reductions from farming** and Russia continued playing a hard card on issues related to the legal framework and the rules of procedure.



United Nations Climate Change Conference
Credit: Drabik Pany (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

These are striking yet partial pieces of the evidence of national power at the UNFCCC. Yet on a larger scale we still know little about which countries are interested in (and capable of) pushing the UNFCCC agenda forward or, alternatively, 'clogging' the decision making process. Along similar lines, we have a blurred understanding of how 'national success' relates to 'agreement success'.

In recent research, I unravel the complexity of climate change bargaining and provide an understanding of cross-national conflicts over issues at the UNFCCC. The central point of departure is the distinction between Annex I and

non-Annex I countries within this international organisation. On the one hand, one may argue that the most influential actors are the members of the so-called Annex I group (OECD countries). These are considered 'strong' players, for they are the ones with the democratic means and economic capacity to prevent global warming. According to the 1995 Berlin Mandate, Annex I countries are the only parties bound to reduce emissions within specific time periods, and thus the only ones which bear a cost of action and should be interested in shaping climate cooperation.

On the other hand, I argue that the members of non-Annex I group are increasingly pivotal, too. Non-Annex I countries have historically been referred to as 'weak' actors, because they are as vulnerable and fragile as their own Least Developed Countries (LDC) and the Alliance of the Small Islands and States (AOSIS). However, recent insights inform us that the non-Annex I delegations are much more well suited to the [aggressive bargaining](#) occurring at the UNFCCC than we used to think. Their resourcefulness is reflected in recurrent use of veto power, the strategy of attracting media attention, the salience with which they visibly antagonise decisions not in their favour and the tendency to take extreme positions. Additionally, the emergence of the BASIC alliance (Brazil-South Africa-India-China), which constitutes the largest unconstrained source of greenhouse gas emissions today, elicits the weight of the 'weak' countries.

To show that both types of countries significantly shape climate agreements, I provide a refined analysis of preferences and capabilities at the UNFCCC. I collected data from documents that report national preferences over more than 30 issues discussed at the climate meetings from the Marrakesh COP7 (2001) until the Durban COP17 (2011). The [patterns emerging from the analyses](#) show that both 'strong' and 'weak' countries have an influential role in negotiations. More specifically, a country benefits from using the strategy that is most affordable given its preferences and capability. In practical terms, I show that a poor country with moderate preferences profits from colliding with the larger group of agreeing countries. By contrast, vulnerable nations that have a high salience for specific issues are better off taking extreme positions that 'tilt' bargaining outcomes towards their preference.

These findings speak directly to what we observed in Warsaw. For example, the leverage of the Philippines delegation supports this insight. While performing a hunger strike to draw attention on the consequences of climate change and typhoon Haiyan, UNFCCC delegate Yeb Sano was among the main initiators of the Green Climate Fund agreement on a multi-billion dollar fund for developing countries. Similarly, countries with little interest in climate change were better off staying invisible. This is one of the reasons why Iran escaped the discontent of Arab countries in Warsaw by focusing on the simultaneous negotiations over its nuclear programme in Geneva.

What are the implications of the 'strong versus weak' dichotomy at the international climate meetings? Clearly this conflict has affected the historical progression towards cooperation. After all, national success does not mean agreement success. Put differently, the politics of the negotiations have created the incentives for some countries to stall them at their discretion, requesting further redistribution and fairness. This has led to little cooperation, while a few countries have enjoyed the success of not compromising their preferences.

How to move forward? An idea that emerged in Doha (COP18) and was reinforced in Warsaw is the introduction of the issue of 'loss and damage'. As my research suggests, protruding, vulnerable countries are institutionally empowered and addressing their concerns of sovereignty and economic loss will attenuate their institutional liability and perhaps solve some of the gridlock centred on 'unfairness' and 'responsibility'.

Additionally, the climate change community needs to blur the distinction between annexes and support a more nation-centred architecture of emission abatement policies. This will be a sore point to negotiate. It will require more emphasis on national pledges (and their fulfilment), and a transformation of the UNFCCC from the main decision 'repository' to a monitoring-only type of institution. Sure, not everyone will want to minimise the importance of the Framework Convention. But then, the climate change regime is already fractioned and multipolar, and the institutional optimism that we had twenty years ago is running out – as is our time to solve the biggest environmental challenge of our time.

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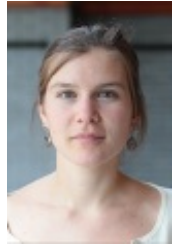
Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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