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Delegation size and equity in climate negotiations: An exploration of key issues

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Abstract: Achieving the Paris Agreement will require fast and far reaching changes, including transformative governance within the international climate negotiations. Processes and interactions within the negotiations have been historically perceived as inequitable and accused of not giving a strong voice to highly vulnerable, low income countries, whose interests were further damaged by the small size of their delegations. Since COP21 in Paris, however, poorer countries with high climate vulnerability have significantly increased the size of their delegations. In the COPs since Paris, the average delegation size of Low Income and Lower-Middle Income Countries, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa, has risen considerably compared with other country income groupings and regions. While we do not know the drivers behind this increase, the trend could contribute to greater equity in the negotiations through better representation and visibility of issues shared by these countries, for instance those related to high climate vulnerability and low readiness. However, delegation size is only one relevant factor in negotiation success, in turn related to a variety of factors both internal and external to the negotiations themselves. More information is required on the causes of the observed shifts, as well as attention to their possible consequences, to understand whether they can successfully contribute to greater climate equity in the context of the necessary transformative climate governance.

Key policy insights:

- Among other causes, the smaller delegation sizes of poorer countries have been pointed as a factor contributing to inequalities in negotiating power within the international climate negotiations
- Since COP21 in Paris, however, the delegation sizes of Low- and Lower-Middle Income Countries, mainly from the Sub Saharan African Region, have increased considerably in comparison with other income groupings or regions
- Comparatively larger delegation sizes of lower-income countries with high vulnerability to climate impacts could contribute to some extent to greater equity in the negotiations through increased presence and visibility of shared challenges

Transformative governance is needed to achieve the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (IIASA, 2018). Limiting global warming to 1.5°C will require global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) to fall by about 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, reaching ‘net zero’ around 2050 (IPCC 2018). Such a paradigm shift implies rapid, far reaching and unprecedented transformational changes in all aspects of society (ICAT, 2018). Even though technologies presently exist to make the attainment of 1.5°C target possible, economic realism, lack of ambition and political positions of countries (rather than a collective globalist perspective) hinder the required speed, scale and urgency that is needed (Mehling & Sagar, 2018). Additional challenges include capacity constraints by developing countries as well as concerns regarding competitive advantage, expressed by the private sector (Kalkuhl et al., 2018). Compared to a 2°C warming world, limiting global warming to 1.5°C can reduce dangerous impacts on ecosystems, human health and well-being, and make it easier to achieve the SDGs.

Strong political institutions at global, national and sub-national levels are critical to good and inclusive governance, yet the current UNFCCC negotiation structures are criticized for being highly inequitable and not adequate for international climate policy cooperation (Schroeder, 2010; Schroeder, Boykoff, & Spiers, 2012; Tørstad & Sælen, 2018). Recent data on Parties delegation size challenge previous claims (Schroeder et al., 2012) that lower income countries do not have the capacity (in terms of number of delegates) to participate on an equal basis in global climate negotiations due to small delegations. We have observed in the last few years a notable increase in the size of delegations from lower income countries, which may indicate a change in the balance of power towards greater equity in negotiation and bargaining capacity of the least developed, most vulnerable states. We explore such increase below and discuss the potential implications for transformative, more inclusive, governance based on an increased presence of lower income countries in climate negotiations through larger delegations capable of participating in more negotiation coalitions (Klöck & Castro, 2018). In large and complex multilateral policy gatherings such as the climate Conference of the Parties (COP), delegation size does indeed matter. Several sessions run in parallel and often continue into the night as final modifications to agreements are negotiated, a process known as “negotiation by exhaustion” (Depledge, 2005). For smaller delegations, this entails difficult trade-offs and missed opportunities to further their interests within the negotiations. Not surprisingly, throughout most of the convention’s history, low-income countries have had on average the smallest delegations. Moreover, for a full decade, from the Hague 2000 COP to the one in Copenhagen in 2009, average delegation size had an exact correspondence with country income groups¹: High Income Countries (HICs) had the largest delegations on average, followed by Upper Middle Income Countries (UMICs), Lower Middle Income Countries (LMICs) and Low Income Countries (LICs) (Fig. 1).

¹ We used the World Bank Income Group classification (WB, 2018)

In 2012, Schroeder et al. argued that along with low levels of expertise, small delegation sizes “...limits poor countries’ negotiating power and makes their participation in each session less effective” and that “‘negotiation by exhaustion’ constrains smaller delegations much more severely than larger ones”. The implications for equity are clear, frequently aggravated by the high vulnerability and low negotiation power of low income countries, even in multilateral, and in principle equitable, negotiations. Recent data, however, suggest a changing landscape. COP Lists of Participants over the last 19 years obtained from UNFCCC demonstrate a change in delegation sizes by country income group. After the peak in participation at the Copenhagen 2009 COP, HICs delegations remained mostly the largest, whereas the other income groups showed no clear correspondence with delegation size. In the Paris 2015 COP, however, LICs and LMICs had for the first time the largest delegation sizes on average (Fig. 1). That trend seems to be subsiding in part, but delegation size seems no longer directly related to country income, raising interesting questions pertaining to agency, balance of power, representation and voice within the negotiations.

FIGURE 1 HERE

In fact, some of the largest delegations (bar those of the host countries) in the last four COPs have come from LICs or LMICs. Excluding host countries and the EU as a party², within the 50 largest delegations in the last four COPs (2015-2018), the representation of LICs and LMICs has increased on average compared with the previous fifteen rounds of climate negotiations (2000-2014), from 8% to 22% for LICs, and from 18% to 30% for LMICs. On the other hand,

² The European Union is a party independent of its member states; if it were included, its delegation would rank sixth in terms of size in the last four COPs.

UMICs representation has fallen from 20% to 18% and HICs representation has fallen from 54% to 30%.

The changes in the top ranks of delegation size also show regional differences. Sub-Saharan African countries constituted the largest regional representation in the 50 largest delegations on average in the last four COPs, more than doubling the representation of the next region, Europe and Central Asia (see table 1). Sub-Saharan Africa was the only region to increase its relative representation, more than doubling it, within this "top 50" grouping.

TABLE 1 HERE

In the COPs as a whole, the representation of Sub Saharan African countries in terms of average number of delegates has increased in the last four years to unprecedented levels of participation. The average size of delegation has increased among SSA countries more than for any other region (around 320%, compared with an average increase of 118% in the other regions) when compared with the period 2000-2014. The increase in delegation sizes of LICs and LMICs, and of Sub Saharan Africa as a region implies a substantial overlap. This is simply because the majority (approximately 90%) of LICs and over 40% of LMICs are in Sub Saharan Africa and most LICs and LMICs joining the group of the 50 largest delegations in the last three COPs come from the region. Both on account of income group and of regional representation, this shift entails that countries with higher climate vulnerability are sending more delegates to the COPs. Composite indicators of climate vulnerability indicate that Sub Saharan African countries have, as a region, the highest average vulnerability scores and that LICs and LMICs have on average higher climate vulnerability than UMICs and HICs (ND-GAIN, 2018; UNOCHA, 2016; Verisk Maplecroft, 2018) .

The COP delegation data offers various discussion points. Firstly, the increase in delegation size among the low-income, most vulnerable countries has occurred simultaneously to a dramatic increase in coalitions particularly since 2005 among developing countries (Klöck & Castro, 2018). More coalitions and larger delegations may translate into more influence to this hitherto marginalized group of weak states. This is supported by an apparent shift in focus and power balance between developed and developing countries towards climate change adaptation measures, which most developing countries decided to include in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Given their generally higher levels of vulnerability, a heightened - and now institutionalized - focus on adaptation-side measures at the global political level would logically drive greater attention, and thus participation, from LIC delegations to the COP. However, participation in more coalitions also increases coordination costs, and it remains unclear if and how fragmentation into more coalitions affects the overall negotiation outcomes. Secondly, the increased delegation size of low-income states may both strengthen and weaken the prospects for transformative governance to achieve the Paris Agreement and 2030 Agenda global goals.

Delegation size is one among several other factors that influence negotiation outcomes. State use of resources (size, diversity and experience of delegations) and behaviour such as negotiation strategies, e.g. hard, value-claiming, non-cooperative approaches and soft, value-creating and cooperative approaches are all means that States use to achieve desired international negotiation outcomes (Bailer, 2017). It is not clear that larger delegations lead to better outcomes for negotiating parties, in and of itself. One of the few published analyses on the matter (Weiler, 2012) found that delegation size was not statistically significant as a predictor of bargaining success in the climate change negotiations when GDP (in turn significantly positively correlated to delegation size) was omitted from the analysis.

In practice, and once delegation size is sufficient to overcome the “negotiation by exhaustion” barrier, the “quality” of the delegation may make a greater difference in bargaining power. This would include ensuring that negotiators or delegates are carefully selected, by each sovereign government, based on expertise and negotiation skills and that they participate in negotiations that are of strategic interest to their respective countries. In that regard, it is worth noting that the start of the changes in the relative delegation sizes coincided in time with the downsizing of the participation of NGOs in the COPs. Up until COP15 (Copenhagen ’09) the participation of NGOs was close to, or even higher than, the count of party delegates for most COPs, whereas afterwards NGO participation, limited in part on account of logistical capacity of the organization, has remained significantly below that of Parties (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 HERE

Therefore, the possibility that NGOs may account for a proportion of the delegation size increase cannot be excluded, pending more research into the composition of delegations. Even if this were the case, however, and assuming both added value and a reasonable alignment of goals and activities of NGO-related delegates with that of their Party, the increase in size of delegations among low-income, highly vulnerable countries, offers a “natural experiment” to assess the actual influence of delegation sizes in the negotiations, versus other relevant variables. Measuring negotiating success will, however, continue to pose great challenges, although increasingly detailed analyses of the COP negotiations process may allow the ascertainment of useful indicators for such task (van der Gaast, 2017).

Overall, weaker States are inclined towards soft strategies, where increased delegation size strengthens the resource input to enable more voice, experience and diversity in the delegations

including participation in more coalitions. While more inclusive and participatory decision making is considered an important enabler for transformative governance to achieve the SDGs, the increased delegation size of weak states also represents a risk of poor governance, such as capture by strong lobby groups and industry interests. Vulnerability and weak institutions, both frequently found in low income states, are strongly correlated with high levels of corruption, clientelism and mismanagement (IIASA 2018). There appears to be a lack of knowledge and conclusive, explanatory information on the cause-effect relationship between delegation size on the COP outcomes. Thus, our commentary will hopefully stimulate debate and inspire new research, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, to better explain the factors and trends underlying the differential increases in delegation size and what this means - if anything - for influence and negotiating outcomes.

Regardless of what explains the observed change, the increase in delegation size among LICs is, on face value, a positive trend that could theoretically lead to greater equity in the COP negotiations. Moreover, should this trend continue, more insights can be gained as to the relative importance of some of the factors that are posited to limit poor countries' negotiating power, specifically low levels of expertise versus small delegation sizes.

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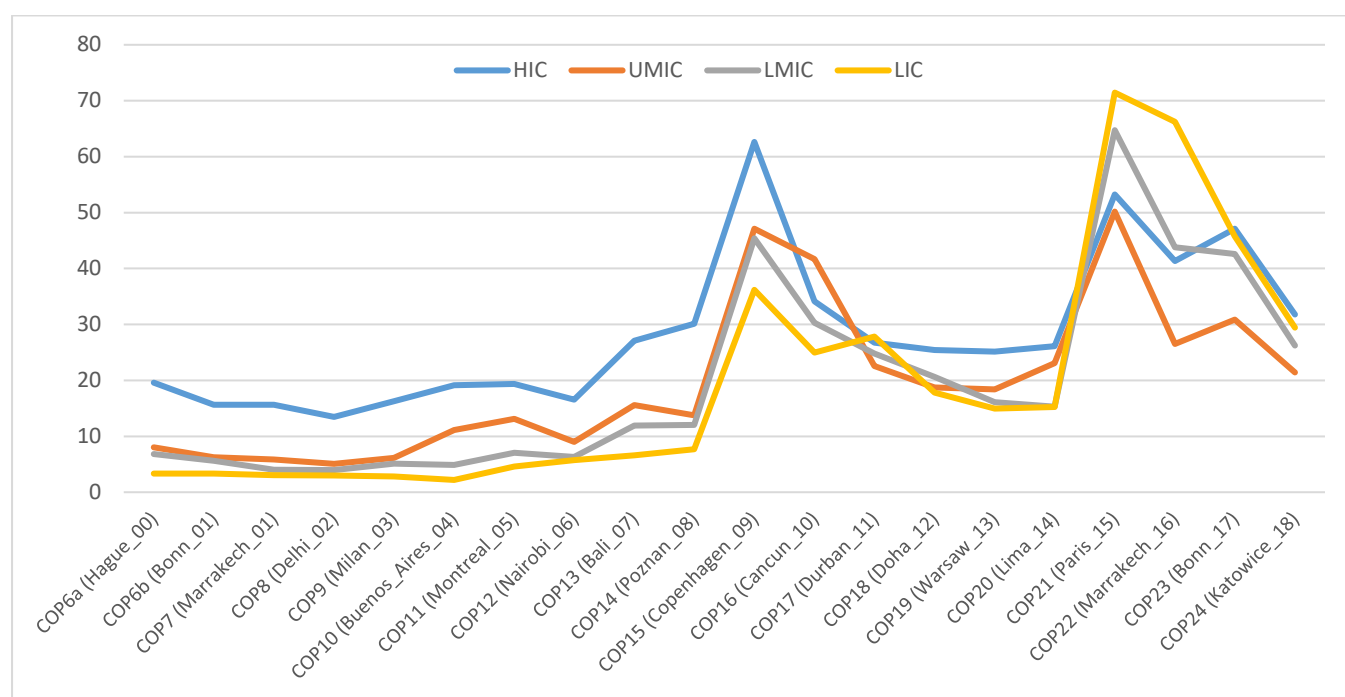
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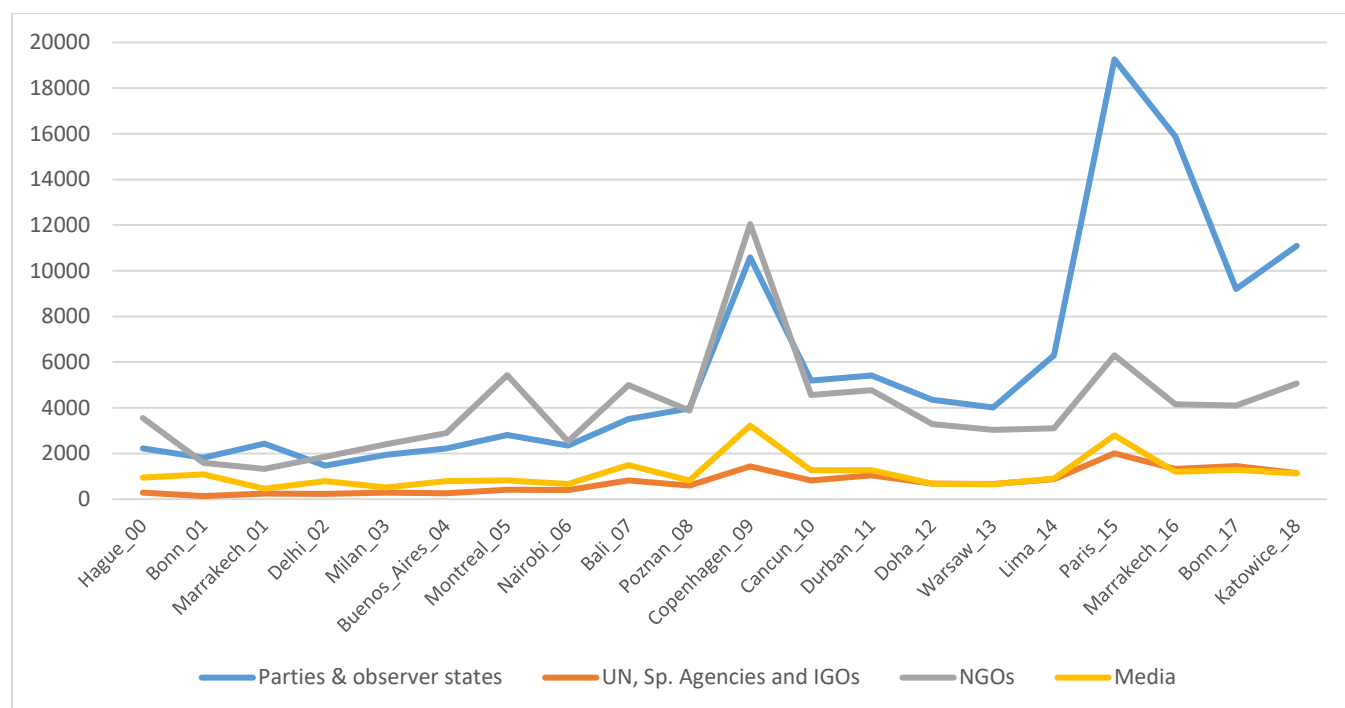
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Figure 1 Average UNFCCC CoP party delegation size by World Bank income group (2000-2018)



Source: authors, based on UNFCCC data. HIC: High Income Country; UMIC: Upper Middle Income Country; LMIC: Lower Middle Income Country; LIC: Low Income Country

Figure 2 Total COP participants by type of nominator (2000-2018)



Source: authors, based on UNFCCC data. UN: United Nations; Sp.: Specialized; IGOs: Inter Governmental Organizations; NGOs: Non Governmental Organizations

Table 1 Regional representation in the top 50 largest delegations in UNFCCC CoPs, average 2000-2014 vs 2015-2018

WB region	2000 - 2014	2015 - 2018
East Asia & Pacific	11	8
Europe & Central Asia	19	10
Latin America & Caribbean	4	3
Middle East & North Africa	4	4
North America	2	2
South Asia	2	2
Sub-Saharan Africa	8	21

Source: authors, based on UNFCCC data