
Is the UN too slow to tackle climate change?

[Society & Culture](#) [1]

[Society & Culture](#) [1] [Climate Change](#) [2] [climate policy](#) [3] [Sweden](#) [4]

Most government and NGO negotiators want UN-led initiatives to tackle climate change, but support for smaller initiatives is growing.

In December 2015, government representatives from 196 countries will once again attempt to reach an agreement to prevent global temperatures from rising more than two degrees Celsius. This will happen during the UN-led COP21 in Paris.

Despite previous agreements between individual countries to limit emissions, discussions at COP meetings and other multilateral UN-led gatherings have been criticised for being too slow. Meanwhile, the level of atmospheric CO₂ continues to increase at a rate that alarms the scientific community.

Academics, economists, and policy makers are now questioning [if the 2^oC goal is even realistic](#) [5] and if progress could be achieved faster if the negotiations were held outside of UN-led initiatives.

But if UN-led initiatives are too slow, then what are the alternatives? And what is the level of support for these alternatives amongst those at the heart of negotiations?

A new study from Sweden suggests that despite ongoing discussions on the slow nature and lack of commitment made by UN-led initiatives, negotiators from governments and NGOs around the world still believe that these large multilateral forums are the best way to proceed.

However, the study also reveals a small but potentially significant shift in opinions towards smaller forums. The belief is that progress could be made faster here.

The study has just been published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*.

Gauging opinions of climate negotiators

“There’s been a lot of criticism of negotiations not being able to deliver and that they are slow,” says Mattias Hjerpe, director of the Centre for Climate Science and Policy Research at Linköping University, Sweden. “The question that a lot of people are asking is: ‘should we shift part of the negotiations to other smaller, more flexible forums?’”

Hjerpe was curious, so during the previous UNFCCC events he and his colleague Naghmeh Nasiritousi from Linköping University posed the following question: “What other forums outside the UNFCCC are, in your view, important for effectively tackling climate change?”

“We wanted to know if there was support for alternative forums, and in particular we were interested to see if there was a trend towards smaller, mini-lateral forums,” says Hjerpe.

The survey was distributed through the [International Negotiations Survey](#) [6] to 1,500 participants at the COP19 in Warsaw and COP20 in Lima.

After collecting the responses, 922 in all, they categorised the answers by the type of respondent (government or NGO representative) and where the representative came from.

They further categorised the responses by the size of the forum (international, national, or smaller), the focus topic (climate science, environmental science, or economic), and whether governments or other actors (individual cities or businesses) should lead the forums.

Support grows for smaller initiatives

When the researchers had categorised all the responses it was clear that there was an overall support for UN-led initiatives.

“We see that the respondents’ views were very fragmented. Many types of specific forums are mentioned, but no particular favourite emerges,” says Hjerpe.

“This changes if we categorise the answers in terms of multilateral or minilateral forums. Then we see a clear pattern,” he says.

UN-led multilateral forums were the most popular, and the remaining responses did not provide any clear alternatives.

The respondents were free to name any kind of forum in the questionnaire; producing a huge amount of names that Hjerpe and Nasiritousi had to sort through. They grouped all the forums mentioned by the respondents according to scale - from large multilateral UN-led meetings, to minilateral forums of just a few countries, and even down to smaller scale initiatives by individual cities or businesses.

Support was highest for UN-led multilateral forums, which includes meetings like the COP. 43 per cent of government representatives and 32 per cent of NGO representatives supported these.

Meanwhile, a larger number of government respondents from North America and Europe supported minilateral forums, which represent a select few countries such as the G7, G8, or G20.

They disagreed on the focus of the forums, however. Europe preferred an economic focus while North American respondents voted for a climate focus.

According to Hjerpe, this highlights the difficulty in finding any widely supported alternatives to the UNFCCC meetings.

Tim Rayner, a senior research associate with the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research at the University of East Anglia, UK, has long argued that there is no clear evidence that any other type of forum could successfully replace the UNFCCC. For him, this survey confirms his view.

But this is not what excites Rayner the most. It’s the fact that support for smaller forums appears to have grown amongst government representatives between the COP19 and COP20 meetings.

Academics are increasingly interested in the potential of smaller forums to speed up talks and raise ambitions beyond UN-led negotiations.

If it is time for change, what are the alternatives?

In the new study, support for smaller forums was lagging behind the overall support for large UN-led meetings, but had increased nonetheless.

Support for local forums was up from 1 per cent recorded after the COP19 meeting, to 10 per cent recorded after the COP20, whilst support for national forums increased from 5 to 13 per cent.

“Of course, we should be cautious about trends as we only have data from two meetings so far, but even so we can see that there is a tenfold increase in support for lower levels of government led initiatives, even if this increase is still rather small” says Hjerpe.

“This is in line with how discussions are progressing. Cities and business are becoming more active in climate negotiations and are likely to be much stronger actors in the future,” he says.

Valuable data that raises more questions

According to Professor Harriet Bulkeley, Department of Geography at the University of Durham, UK, the study provides valuable data on the little known opinions of this key group of people – government and NGO representatives.

However, she points out that it is perhaps not surprising that support for UN-led forums is high amongst people attending these very forums.

She would like to see the same question asked outside of UN-led meetings.

Bulkeley is also curious to know why support for smaller forums is increasing.

“Is the attention being given by states to local governments a result of a recognition that [climate] targets cannot be achieved without the cities or is it a way of shifting the responsibility for action?” she asks.

Can the UN coordinate smaller forums?

According to Hjerpe and Nasiritousi, the UN Secretariat is attempting to coordinate some of the non-government initiatives. For them, the big question now is if this will succeed.

“At the Lima COP meeting they launched the [NAZCA initiative](#) [7], where cities and businesses could submit their initiatives to combat climate change. At the UN Climate Change Conference last week in Bonn, Germany, these initiatives were on display everywhere,” says Hjerpe.

“You can see all the different initiatives that cities and businesses are doing. So, even though the UN talks seem slow, there is a tremendous pace of action taking place elsewhere,” he says.

Rayner agrees.

“It’s interesting how leading figures in the negotiations have recently made public statements seeking to [manage expectations](#) [8] about the capacity of any agreement reached in Paris to deliver the 2°C commitment. The line they are taking is that the UNFCCC is not the only means to deliver progress,” he writes in an email to ScienceNordic.

The question now, according to Hjerpe, Bulkeley, and Rowley, is how and if the UN will be able to coordinate this increasingly diverse range of initiatives and alternative forums.

Hjerpe and Nasiritousi plan to repeat the questionnaire at this year’s COP21 meeting.

 [A new Swedish study reports that negotiators from governments and NGOs around the world still believe that large multilateral UN meetings are the best forums for tackling climate change. But support for small forums is growing. \(Photo: Photo: <http://www.shutterstock.com/da/pic-224217049/stock-photo-climate-change-wooden-sign-with-a-desert-background.html>\)](#)

[target=" blank">Shutterstock \[9\]](#)

 [shutterstock_224217049.jpg](#) [10]

[Changing climate can change building standards](#) [11] [Adapting rice cultivation to climate changes](#) [12]

[Bright spots in the environmental gloom](#) [13] [Calculating the environmental footprint of governments](#)

[14] [Environmental brutes of the past](#) [15]

[Mattias Hjerpe](#) [16] [Naghmeh Nasiritousi](#) [17] [Tim Rayner](#) [18] [Harriet Bulkeley](#) [19]

[Views on alternative forums for effectively tackling climate change.](#) | DOI: 10.1038/NLCIMATE2684

[20] [Blog post by Tim Rayner and Andy Jordan \(University of East Anglia, UK\)](#) [5]

[Catherine Jex](#) [21]

June 16, 2015 - 06:25

This field is not in use. The footer is displayed in the mini panel called "Footer (mini panel)"

Source URL: <http://sciencenordic.com/un-too-slow-tackle-climate-change>

Links:

[1] <http://sciencenordic.com/category/section/society-culture>

[2] <http://sciencenordic.com/climate-change>

[3] <http://sciencenordic.com/climate-policy>

[4] <http://sciencenordic.com/category/countries/sweden>

[5] <http://environmentaleurope.ideasononeurope.eu/2015/03/31/eus-commitment-2c-target-unravelling/>

[6] <http://www.internationalnegotiationssurvey.se>

[7] <http://climateaction.unfccc.int>

[8] <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/feb/04/paris-climate-summit-missing-global-warming-target-would-not-be-failure>

[9] http://sciencenordic.com/sites/default/files/shutterstock_224217049.jpg

[10] http://sciencenordic.com/sites/default/files/shutterstock_224217049_0.jpg

[11] <http://sciencenordic.com/changing-climate-can-change-building-standards>

[12] <http://sciencenordic.com/adapting-rice-cultivation-climate-changes>

[13] <http://sciencenordic.com/bright-spots-environmental-gloom>

[14] <http://sciencenordic.com/calculating-environmental-footprint-governments>

[15] <http://sciencenordic.com/environmental-brutes-past>

[16] <http://www.tema.liu.se/tema-m/medarbetare/hjerpe-mattias?l=en>

[17] <http://www.tema.liu.se/tema-m/medarbetare/nasiritousi-naghmeh?l=en>

[18] <https://www.uea.ac.uk/environmental-sciences/people/profile/tim-rayner>

[19] <https://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/staff/geogstaffhidden/?id=929>

[20] <http://nature.com/articles/doi:10.1038/nclimate2684>

[21] <http://sciencenordic.com/content/catherine-jex>