THE ACCOUNTANT, THE ADMONISHER AND THE ANIMATOR: GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITION

Report from the COP25 climate summit in Madrid

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Abstract

The climate summit COP25, organised in December 2019 under Chilean presidency in Madrid, took place under the shadow of an increasingly polarized global political situation. Its objective was to complete the transition of UN climate governance to the framework laid out in the Paris agreement in 2015. The report takes COP25 as a starting point, to examine how the current transition of climate governance is unfolding *in practice*, and what obstacles it is encountering. It places the focus not only on states and formal negotiation outcomes, but also on side-events, happenings and the role of wider civil society. Based on our observations, we argue that UN climate governance currently faces a set of distinct and partly conflicting expectations. We condense these into three stylized roles: the accountant, the admonisher, and the animator. After discussing each of these roles in turn, we go on to explore the dissonances and disconnects accompanying the current transformation of global climate governance. We relate these to institutional features and legacies of the UNFCCC, but also to new tensions that are rooted in inherent contradictions between the three roles. We conclude by reflecting on possible evolutions of global climate governance, sketching three plausible future scenarios.

Keywords: Global climate governance, Paris agreement, transnational climate action, performativity, collaborative event ethnograph

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Introduction

The twenty-fifth Conference of Parties (COP25), which took place under Chilean presidency on December 2nd to 15th, 2019 in Madrid, was exceptional on many accounts. Initially planned to take place in Brazil, the Chilean government took over responsibility for hosting after extreme-right President Jair Bolsonaro retracted his country's commitment. When in turn social unrest erupted in Chile, it was finally organized in great haste in Madrid. COP25 thus took place under the shadow of an increasingly polarized global political situation. This included a global wave of social mobilizations against growing social and economic inequalities, many of which were sparked by decisions relating to energy and transportation policy. The social dimensions of climate policy and strategies for a 'just transition' therefore were a constant theme in public debates. Another global trend was the rise of a nationalism linked to climate-sceptic discourse, symbolised by the Brazilian case, but also by the Trump administration's initiation in early November of the procedure to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement. At the same time, the years 2018 and 2019 had also seen an unprecedented mobilization of youth around the world in favour of more ambitious climate policy, as well as the publication of three IPCC Special Reports providing strong evidence of an intensification of the climate crisis. Accordingly, the Chilean Presidency had entitled COP25 'Time for Action', using the symbol of a running, dissolving clock to convey the message that the international community must act urgently.

And yet on paper, the Madrid summit was only intended to be a 'transition COP' towards the post-2020 climate regime set out in the Paris Agreement (2015). No strong decision was programmed, and the summit's official agenda did not include work on increasing the ambition of national pledges. Instead, COP25's main objective was to finalize the transition to the post-Paris architecture: first, by completing the accounting, reporting and transparency scheme that will guide states in the implementation of the treaty; and second, by concluding the assessment of pre-2020 climate action. In addition to the official negotiations, the aim was to further encourage non-state actors – firms, cities and subnational governments – to participate in decarbonisation efforts.

However, despite being the longest COP in history, the Madrid summit did not live up to expectations. It not only failed to overcome the deep divide between countries which are willing to act and others which are determined to obstruct the process; it also revealed a growing disconnect between social demands and the multilateral process itself, which failed to take into account concerns voiced by civil society. For instance, the concurrent organization of an 'alternative COP' in Chile remained largely unnoticed at the official summit in Madrid. Convened by hundreds of environmental organisations around a series of workshops and demonstrations, it targeted structural injustices underpinning environmental problems

in Latin America, including water scarcity due to resource privatisation and climate change, environmental impacts of extractivism, and the failure to protect indigenous people's rights and the safety of environmental activists. The poor results of COP25 hence raise concerns that without a deep readjustment of the UN process in the future, it runs the risk of failing at its task of moving the world towards decarbonisation (Biniaz, 2020).

Outline of the report

The report is the result of a collective research effort that included a series of preparatory meetings and a two-week observation at COP25. Following the method of "collaborative event ethnography" (Brosius and Campbell 2010, Aykut et al. 2017), we combined techniques of participant observation, qualitative interviews, a common observation matrix, and data and experience sharing routines, to examine both the official climate talks and events taking place outside of the negotiations. Our aim was to understand how the current transition of global climate governance is unfolding in practice, and what obstacles it is encountering. By placing the focus not only on states and formal negotiation outcomes, but also on side-events, happenings and the role of wider civil society, we hope to provide an original take on the Madrid COP, and complement existing analyses of global climate governance.[1]

We start from the assumption that the Paris shift in global climate governance is not a completed event, but an ongoing, conflictual, and open-ended process. The new governance architecture builds on a cyclical 'pledge and review' approach that combines the regular submission of voluntary commitments – so-called nationally determined commitments, or NDCs – and a mandatory transparency and reporting scheme (Keohane and Oppenheimer 2016). Within this new architecture, the multilateral process under the umbrella of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is no longer centred on interstate negotiations. Instead, it is encouraged to "orchestrate" climate actions by states, businesses and subnational entities alike (Abbott 2018). This transition from a "regulatory" to a "catalytic and facilitative model" of governance entails a series of institutional innovations (Hale 2016), but also important discursive and symbolic work (Aykut et al., forthcoming).

We find that UN climate governance – in which we include the UNFCCC secretariat, the respective COP presidencies and negotiation bodies, but also other participants of the annual climate summits – faces a set of distinct and partly conflicting expectations in this transition. Based on our observations, we propose to condense these into three stylized roles.[2] These roles are summarised in Table 1 and presented successively in the first three sections of the report. The accountant role entails the definition of common metrics and formats for voluntary pledges, and the creation of procedures for their assessment. This reporting and review infrastructure is intended to set the pace for an iterative, multilevel policy cycle, whereby states and firms exposed to public 'blaming and shaming' progressively raise their policy ambitions. The role of the admonisher is to keep the climate issue on the public agenda and convey a sense of urgency to delegates and businesses. To do this, UN bodies elicit scientific

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[1] This perspective is indebted to a series of COP reports issued by Amy Dahan and her team at EHESS Paris (*Koyré Climate Series*).

[2] We understand these roles not as fixed and predetermined functions, but rather as the result of a temporary convergence of expectations, interactions and practices of different actors. Taking such a perspective highlights processes of role-provision, role-taking, and role-making, which imply power asymmetries between actors as well as role conflicts (e.g. Goffman 1959).

assessments (such as the IPCC 1.5°C Special Report) at key political moments, and provide spaces at COPs to present new scientific findings to a global audience. Finally, the role of the animator is to positively inspire public and private climate action by aligning actors' expectations with the performative narrative of an ongoing 'planetary transition' to a decarbonised world economy. Hence, climate summits increasingly provide occasions to launch new initiatives, display 'best practices' and technological solutions, and celebrate success stories.

TABLE 1   Three distinct roles in post-Paris UN climate governance

	Accountant	**Admonisher**	**Animator**
Expectations	Ensure transparency and comparability of data, enable public reviews	Highlight urgency to act, mobilize civil society, pressure state delegates	Positively influence actors' beliefs and motivations
Activities	Defining common metrics, reporting formats and review routines	Issuing reports and assessments, staging science	Showcasing of best practices, celebration of success stories

After discussing each of these roles in turn, we go on to explore the dissonances and disconnects accompanying the current transformation of global climate governance. We relate these to institutional features and legacies of the UNFCCC, but also to new tensions that are rooted in inherent contradictions between the three roles. We conclude by reflecting on possible evolutions of global climate governance, sketching three plausible future scenarios.

The Accountant: building a reporting infrastructure for climate action

Madrid was the theatre of heated debates over a seemingly dry and technical topic: accounting and reporting rules. Negotiation items on the format of national transparency reports, common timeframes for country pledges, and rules for carbon markets proved to be exceptionally sticky, and had to be postponed until next year. This major setback was in part due to the current polarization of world politics. Hence, the uncompromising negotiating stances of Australia and Brazil, as well as the prospect of the US retreat from the Paris agreement next year, paralyzed large swathes of the climate talks.

More generally, the stalemate at COP25 also reflects a growing politicisation of discussions on indicators, metrics, and accounting rules in global politics, which has accompanied the rise of voluntary or 'soft' governance approaches (Merry 2011). Reporting forms the backbone of such approaches, as it provides the only way for parties and civil society actors to hold states and firms accountable for their pledges, track implementation, and expose laggards to public 'naming and shaming'. The Paris architecture is no exception. At its core, it combines an 'enhanced transparency framework' for

reporting and a 'global stocktake' to track progress, which is to start in 2023. Introduced in 2015, both of these elements were further spelled out and operationalized in the 2018 Katowice Rulebook.[3]
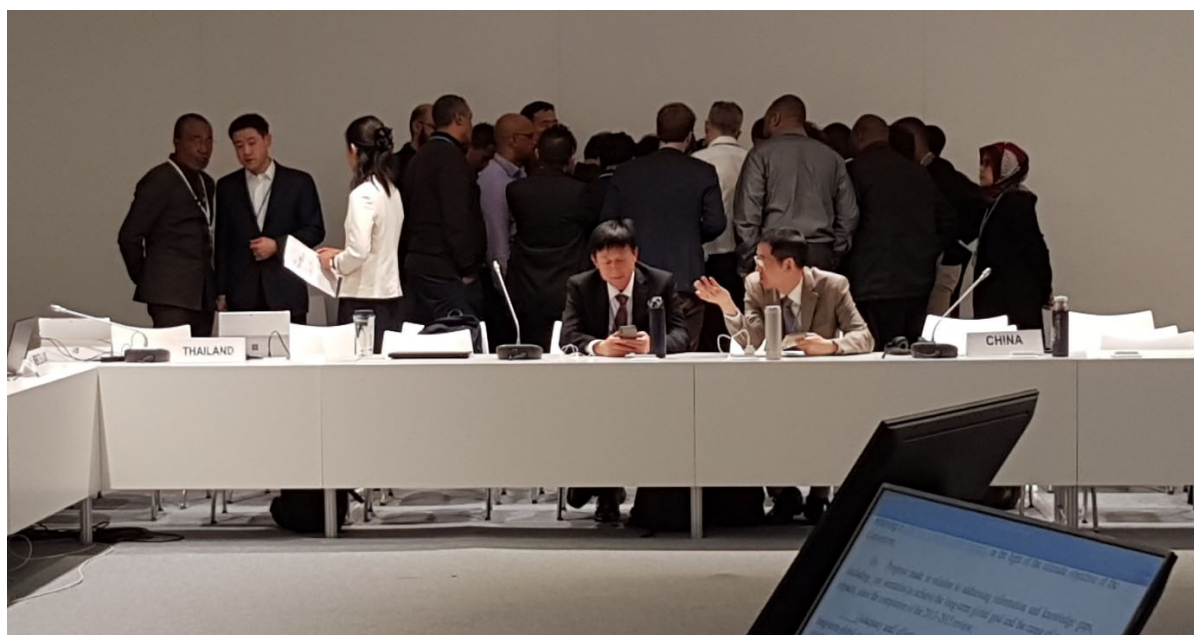

FIGURE 1   One of many 'huddles' during the negotiations on reporting and transparency

States agreed to progressively replace the existing, differentiated UNFCCC reporting and assessment structure with a common procedure for developed and developing countries. But a number of aspects of the transparency framework, such as the format and content of the report summaries, were still open for negotiation in Madrid. The same holds for the global stocktake, where open questions concerned, inter alia, the information sources used and the inclusion (or not) of non-state climate action, as well as the role and rights of civil society actors in the assessment process. The underlying issue here is to what extent the stocktake can be more than a secluded technical exercise, and instead provide a public forum for a wide range of actors to publicly assess progress and discuss setbacks in policy implementation.

A missed opportunity to complete the reporting and transparency framework

Questions of differentiation, which have been a longstanding source of conflict in climate talks, resurfaced forcefully at COP25. Major developing countries such as China adopted a strategy aimed at delaying all major decisions on reporting and transparency under the Paris agreement until next year, when the US will no longer be part of this negotiation track. Simultaneously, they insisted on keeping existing assessment processes under the Climate Convention open, in order not to let the USA off the climate hook. One negotiation item affected by this strategy was the definition of 'common timeframes' for country pledges. Currently, some NDCs cover five years, others 10 or 15 years. This is to be harmonised for the second commitment period starting in 2025. In Madrid, some countries advocated for five-year plans, arguing that longer timeframes might lock in low ambition levels. Others contended that 10-year periods would lighten the administrative burden of repeated revisions for developing

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[3] Modalities, procedures and guidelines (MPGs) for the transparency framework

countries and favour long-term planning. A second negotiation item concerned the inclusion of 'common tabular formats' in the summaries of the biennial transparency reports (BTRs), which countries are asked to provide to track policy implementation. These reports inform the global stocktake. On both of these topics, negotiations were postponed. The same holds for discussions on 'common metrics', which concern the rules for converting non-CO_2 emissions into CO_2 equivalents. As the formula used affects the relative importance of methane emissions from agriculture and cattle, the issue is hotly disputed.[4]

Madrid also provided room for a range of different assessment exercises. Indeed, the UNFCCC process has created regular occasions and procedures to assess individual and collective progress. One such format is the so-called 'stocktake on pre-2020 implementation and ambition'. After a first round at COP24 in Katowice, a second was conducted at COP25 in Madrid. On this occasion, the EU, France, India, Rwanda, and St. Lucia were asked to lay out their achievements and identify gaps in front of a mixed audience of delegates and observers. The countries successively presented their climate policies, reviewed their implementation, and listed supplementary measures and financial contributions. Developing countries also used the forum to highlight a series of gaps: between 'science-based targets' and Kyoto objectives, and between those objectives and actual achievements, as well as between financial promises and effective provision of funds. In her concluding statement, the representative of St. Lucia summed up a general feeling when she stated that "somehow we go from COP to COP to COP without doing something about the different gaps". And indeed, for multilateral assessments of policy implementation to be effective, the format of the exercise must permit a focused public discussion, structured around complete and comparable data. In Madrid, however, the presentations varied greatly in terms of focus, level of detail, and data provided. As in earlier, similar exercises, countries refrained from making the assessment fully transparent and operational, fearing that this would expose their climate policies to public criticism and lead to pressure to increase ambition beyond what they had internally negotiated. The outputs of the pre-2020 stocktake were thus fairly limited. This augurs similar difficulties and risks for the forthcoming global stocktake in 2023.

In light of the difficulties in agreeing on common reporting formats and conducting effective assessments, an umbrella civil society initiative emerged in mid-2018 to complement the official process. The Independent Global Stocktake (iGST) brings together UN agencies, research institutes, international NGOs, and universities. It aims to suggest key issues and questions for the global stocktake around the three core pillars of climate action (mitigation, adaptation, finance), and support the multilateral process through external expertise. This ongoing work is backed by an intense process of gathering and compiling data into relevant indicators. In the coming years, the iGST will also propose a relevant structure to compile the assessment and present the information in a way that is transparent, understandable, and 'usable' for the public. But the extent to which this initiative will be linked to the official UN process is still under discussion.

Carbon markets: when no outcome is better than a bad one

The operationalisation of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement on 'international cooperation mechanisms' was without a doubt the most disputed topic in Madrid. The question had been left out of the Katowice rulebook, and is generally considered the last big pending issue on the way to completing the Paris

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[4] States agreed to wait for the publication of the Sixth IPCC Assessment Report before continuing discussions.

framework. In Madrid, negotiations mainly focused on accounting rules for bilateral carbon trading between countries (Art. 6.2) and private carbon markets within the newly created 'sustainable development mechanism' (Art. 6.4). They reflected highly divergent views on the purpose and function of market mechanisms. One contentious issue concerned so-called 'corresponding adjustments', a measure aimed at avoiding double counting of the emissions reduction benefits of a given project by adjusting the respective national communications to the UNFCCC. The Brazilian delegates rejected this principle, arguing that it should be possible to count emissions reductions from a project in both the investing and host countries. A second controversy concerned the possibility of carrying over credits accumulated in the Kyoto era – by surpassing national reductions targets, or through the Clean Development Mechanism – to count towards the achievement of a country's post-2020 goals. Hence, Australia claimed access to carryover credits for beating its – utterly unambitious – Kyoto targets. Using these credits would allow the country to cut in half what it needs to do to meet its 2030 target (a 26% emissions cut below 2005 levels). As both the Brazilian and the Australian proposals would clearly undermine the environmental integrity of the cooperation mechanism, they were firmly rejected by the EU and a number of other countries. The Alliance of Small Island States went even further, advocating the automatic cancellation of a share of traded credits in order to ensure that the market would in fact deliver overall mitigation in global emissions. Developing countries also proposed to levy a 'share of proceeds' from emissions trading in order to fund adaptation measures. In sum, discussions on Article 6 exposed the political vulnerability of the construction of emissions market mechanisms to being 'gamed', leading not to emissions reductions but to the creation of gigantic loopholes that could lead to increases in GHG emissions. As a result, negotiations on Article 6 did not result in any tangible outcome at COP25.

Keeping track of non-state action

The effectiveness and relevance of post-Paris climate governance will also depend on its ability to coordinate a multiplicity of climate-related private initiatives (Chan et al., 2015; Hale, 2016). In fact, an increasing number of investors, businesses, and cities have committed to disclosing their emissions and establishing strategies to reduce them. This has led to the creation of new accounting and reporting schemes, many of which are managed by private actors. The CDP (formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project, founded in 2000), a non-profit organisation based in London that claims to work with over 6,000 corporations, as well as with cities, states, and regions, established a set of methods and metrics for accounting and self-reporting carbon emissions and other environmental data which are used around the world. Using them allows businesses to understand the extent to which climate change and policy measures expose their core business and supply chains to higher costs, and to prepare the introduction of internal carbon pricing strategies as well as the publication of voluntary GHG reductions commitments. CDP data is also used by investors wishing to understand the climate-risk exposure of their portfolios. It is not, however, the only accounting and reporting standard in the field. Other examples include the Climate Disclosure Standards Board (CDSB, 2007), an international consortium of business and environmental NGOs offering companies a framework for integrating environmental information into mainstream financial reporting; and the Partnership for Carbon Accounting Financials (PCAF), an industry-led partnership spearheaded by global banks and created in the aftermath of the Paris COP to facilitate the implementation of the agreement in the financial sector. Several other initiatives exist, such as the Greenhouse Gas Protocol, coordinated by the World Resources Institute, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, which proposes standards for companies and municipalities to develop GHG inventories and set climate mitigation targets.

While such initiatives can contribute to global carbon reduction efforts, tracking progress on implementation is an essential requirement to maintain credibility. Moreover, such private initiatives also legitimise the claims of businesses and cities to be key partners in the fight against climate change, and support their ambition to access climate finance opportunities. During COP25, the UNFCCC therefore held consultations on possibilities for further connecting non-state initiatives to the UN process, in a workshop entitled 'Pressing "Record" on Climate Action'. On this occasion, the UN Special Envoy for the 2019 Climate Action Summit Luis Alfonso de Alba and co-facilitators[5] acknowledged the pressing need to rethink the role of the UNFCCC in order to further support and keep score of private climate actions. In particular, they identified stocktaking exercises, as well as the enhancement of the Global Climate Action portal (or NAZCA), which discloses these initiatives, as potential means of fulfilling this new task.

The Admonisher: stressing the urgency of action

The Chilean Presidency framed COP25 as a critical moment to address the 'climate emergency'. Its communication strategy mobilised symbols such as a dissolving clock and the extensive use of words conveying urgency. References to scientific facts and new findings underpinned the call for action. This framing was already manifest in the corridors guiding delegates and observers from the Feria de Madrid metro station to the conference building, where large billboards displayed references to ongoing or projected changes induced by climate change, such as the estimate of 143 million climate-related migrants by 2050, and catastrophic levels of ice melting or biodiversity loss, to support the emergency framing.

FIGURE 2   Image 2: billboards in the Feria de Madrid metro station

Staging science

"[T]he point of no return is no longer over the horizon, it is in sight and hurtling towards us", said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres just before COP25 started in Madrid. This rhetoric of emergency and

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[5] The event was chaired by Surabi Menon, ClimateWorks (Co-Chair); Todd Edwards, Mission 2020 (Co-Chair); Matthew Phillips, UNFCCC (Co-Chair); and Ivan Jose Vejar Pardo, COP25 Presidency.

dangerous tipping points pervaded official statements, public events, press releases, and media reports throughout the two weeks of the COP. For instance, UNFCCC Secretary Patricia Espinosa sustained this rhetoric during her public appearances in 2019 to remind states of their duty to act: "The youth are sending a clear and unmistakable message: This is an emergency! And I am very grateful for that."[6] And added during COP25 that: "[W]hat the science is telling us is very, very clear. We are facing a climate emergency and we are approaching a series of tipping points. We must act urgently."[7]

On a number of occasions during the COP, politicians and climate activists referred to scientific expertise to enjoin states to reach an agreement. In some cases, scientists and activists even joined their voices to send a common message and attract more media attention. For instance, the high-level event on 'Climate Emergency' hosted by the Chilean presidency gathered on stage some of the most vocal advocates of immediate political action: the environmental scientist Johan Rockström;[8] the Spanish Minister for the Ecological Transition Teresa Ribera; Jennifer Morgan, the Executive Director of Greenpeace; and the activist Greta Thunberg. Whereas Rockström presented an updated version of IPCC's "burning amber" risk assessment diagram to expose the "scientific evidence for emergency" (Lenton et al. 2019), the other panellists mentioned the "powerful voice of science" (Ribera) and "the guiding light of science" (Morgan) to urge governments to take action, claiming that "we no longer have time to leave out the science" (Thunberg). Similarly, an event called "Unite Behind The Science" where Thunberg and fellow youth activist Luisa Neubauer shared the stage with five scientists, received extensive media coverage.

To be sure, the use of science to draw attention to the climate problem is by no means new. Political decision-making and scientific expertise have been closely interwoven since the beginning of climate talks. Historically, IPCC assessment reports have often been published at strategic moments in international climate negotiations, and the "IPCC-SBSTA tandem" (Dahan-Dalmedico 2008) has constituted an important interface between the multilateral process and the scientific assessment practice.[9] Moreover, COP25 provides only the latest example of a method consisting in staging[10] scientific expertise in multilateral settings. Such practices, it has been argued, aim at increasing moral and public pressure on state delegates, encourage them to use their discretionary power and thereby facilitate agreement (Schüssler et al. 2014). By highlighting the importance of the issue under discussion, they also invest UN multilateralism with symbolic importance (Little 1995). However, while staging practices are not new, the voluntary approach to climate action, in which 'soft' techniques of framing, naming, and shaming are given increasing importance, makes these practices all the more relevant. In an increasingly polarized climate arena, this situation also gives way to new conflicts. Recent

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[6] Tweet by P. Espinosa, 18.06.2019, https://twitter.com/pespinosac/status/1140934797952454656.

[7] Press conference with P. Espionsa, 09.12.2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5usZEwIdJyw.

[8] Just in time for COP25, Rockström and a group of other influential Earth system scientists published a comment in *Nature* on the current state of science regarding tipping points. Rockström referred to this paper (Lenton et al. 2019) as scientific evidence for a climate emergency. This comment, however, led to some criticism in the scientific community.

[9] For an overview of the emergence of the IPCC and its interconnections with UNFCCC bodies, see Hulme and Mahoney (2010) and Beck and Mahoney (2018). For a more personal account by the influential climate scientist Stephen H. Schneider, see Schneider (2009).

[10] The use of this term to study social interactions is due to Goffmann (1956). Hilgartner (2000) analysed the US Science Academy science-policy interface from the perspective of "staging science".

controversies surrounding the adoption of the IPCC Special Reports by the COP offer illustrative examples.

The IPCC under growing public scrutiny

Since its creation in 1988, the IPCC has framed its task as providing "policy-relevant, but not policy-prescriptive" scientific inputs to the negotiation process. In a voluntary regime, however, negotiations will no longer be as central. Instead, assessing states' and businesses' implementation of climate policies will become a more focal aspect of climate expertise.[11] Since it is almost impossible to provide such assessments without being to some extent policy-prescriptive, new tensions arise around the IPCC.

Early signs of these tensions could be observed in connection with the IPCC 1.5°C Special Report. By inviting the IPCC to provide an assessment on this topic by 2018, the UNFCCC brought science into the spotlight. The focus of the report was closely linked to the political debates and unresolved conflicts around the Paris Agreement. In this setting, the report became the central reference for youth activists and other actors calling for more ambitious climate action under the new climate regime. Consequently, and despite a strengthened communication strategy – including a communication handbook and dedicated pavilions at COP24 and COP25 – the IPCC did not have full control over the central messages of the report as taken up in wider political discourse.[12] Not all states' delegations were happy with this partly new role for the IPCC and with the high visibility of the Special Report (Hickman 2018). This resulted in substantial conflicts at COP24 in Katowice, where during the plenary conference delegates debated whether the COP should "welcome" or merely "take note" of IPCC SR15 (IISD 2018). Such debate continued after COP24 and resurfaced – albeit less intensively – during COP25 around the two Special Reports on land and the ocean/cryosphere.

Currently, there is heated debate on whether the IPCC should align its assessment cycles with the global stocktake.[13] This debate raises the crucial question of the extent to which the IPCC should play the role of a referee when monitoring policy implementation. This would involve it more closely in policy debates and support practices of 'naming and shaming', as described later. However, it could also lead to new conflicts that weaken the image of the IPCC as a 'neutral' sources of information.

A functional diversification of climate expertise

COP25 also provided a space for other scientific actors to launch new reports or present their findings to a wider audience. Indeed, the fact that the IPCC is not assessing policy implementation, as well as the relative opacity of its reports to non-specialists, has spurred a progressive diversification of climate expertise. Among the new initiatives, many have been launched in the aftermath of the breakdown of climate talks in Copenhagen in 2009. These deliberately policy-prescriptive initiatives range from

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[11] For an anticipation of this development see e.g. the commentary by leading IPCC scientist of AR5 just before COP21 (Carraro et al. 2015).

[12] See for example the debate about the claim that there are '12 years left'. The first article referring to it was Watts (2018): https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-15c-warns-landmark-un-report; chapter Lead Author Myles Allen then replied (2019): https://theconversation.com/why-protesters-should-be-wary-of-12-years-to-climate-breakdown-rhetoric-115489, for a call of the political responsibility of the IPCC, see Asayama et al. (2019).

[13] See the work of the IPCC's Task Group on the Organization of the Future Work of the IPCC in Light of the Global Stocktake

general assessments of overall progress to highly normative evaluations of country performance. The expertise produced by these initiatives can therefore perform different functions and potentially inform different phases in the upcoming global review process. The UNEP Emissions Gap and Production Gap Reports, the Global Carbon Project, and the Climate Action Tracker, which were among the most visible productions in Madrid, nicely illustrate this 'functional diversification'.

The UNEP Emissions Gap Report has been published every year since 2009 by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), with financial support provided mainly by national governments (see UNEP 2019). Issued just before each COP, the report compares the projected developments of greenhouse gas emissions against pathways derived from different political commitments and from the 2°C and 1.5°C targets. The report thus highlights the inadequacy of actual political action in the light of science-based recommendations. In 2019, this powerful image of a 'gap' was also adapted to characterise – somewhat paradoxically – excess capacity in fossil fuel production. A consortium of research institutes, together with UNEP, published the first-ever Production Gap Report, which contains an "assessment of countries' plans and outlooks for fossil fuel production, and what is needed to align this production with climate objectives" (SEI et al. 2019). Furthermore, the Global Carbon Project, a core project of Future Earth,14 annually tracks the evolution of GHG emissions. As their data also allow a country-by-country analysis, they are particularly relevant for the voluntary regime. The new data on still-rising emissions "amidst slowly emerging climate policies" (Peters et al. 2020) were first presented during a side event at COP25, and got remarkable attention at the COP and in media reporting. The Climate Action Tracker, a joint initiative by Climate Analytics and the New Climate Institute, scientifically tracks climate action and policies by governments in the context of long-term temperature targets. By measuring whether countries are on track to meet the agreed targets, the CAT provides scientific support for 'naming and shaming' as well as success stories.

It remains to be seen how the relationship between the general warning provided by the IPCC and policy-prescriptive analyses by UNEP and private initiatives will develop in the future. In an increasingly polarised climate regime, however, it is to be expected that both ends of policy-relevant climate expertise will become the subject of political debate. Functional diversification of these admonishing actors may be the right way forward. In this context, the IPCC is faced with the fundamental question of the extent to which both the timing of its products and their content will be aligned with the Paris reporting and resubmission cycles.

The Animator: sustaining the 'Paris momentum'

During the two weeks of COP25, we witnessed numerous examples of positive storytelling, motivational speeches, staging of success stories, and display of best practices. Taken together, these conveyed the impression that the transformation towards a decarbonised world economy is not an abstract possibility, but an already-unfolding process. Based on such positive examples, many speakers argued that despite a shrinking window for action, the Paris temperature goals are still within reach.

This observation speaks to a central feature of international regimes: namely, that actors' expectations in an area of international relations converge around a set of common norms of behaviour (Krasner 1983). In Paris-type governance arrangements, where such convergence cannot rest on binding rules and

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[14] https://futureearth.org/

obligations, it relies more on discursive and symbolic work (Aykut et al., forthcoming). Indeed, the Paris architecture is understood by its main proponents as instituting a process in which "the many interdependent parts... interact in mutually facilitative ways" (Hale and Roger 2014: 535). The underlying image is that of a virtuous cycle, in which narratives "contribute as much to change as the agreement itself" (cited in Losson 2015), as positive messages and experiences create trust and alter actors' expectations and preferences (Bang et al. 2016). Climate summits are ideal occasions to observe this shift towards a 'performative' global governance.

Showcasing best practices, celebrating climate action

In the negotiations, a series of formats new to the UNFCCC have been created over the past years to display climate action and share 'best practices'. These include the 'technical examination process' started in 2014 to "explore high-potential mitigation policies, practices and technologies" and the Talanoa Dialogue, initiated at COP23 to assess pre-2020 action and "shar[e] ideas, skills and experience through storytelling". The Koronivia Workshop on agriculture, held on the second and third days of COP25, provides another illustration. During the event, countries presented 'best practices' in optimizing and reducing synthetic fertilizer use, to reconcile climate mitigation and food production imperatives (e.g., through drones, biological nitrification, or nitrogen fixing). The COP presidency took every occasion to laud the outlook of these approaches, and delegates appeared to be galvanised by the prospect of a transition towards low-emissions agriculture.

Overall, however, positive storytelling sits rather uneasily with the language and dynamics of climate negotiations. Its principal locus in Madrid was not in the climate talks themselves, but in the so-called 'Action Hub' in the first conference hall, situated immediately after the credential check at the entrance. The centrality of the location, its name and design – a half-open space with a stage and seating rows in the form of an amphitheatre – stood symbolically for a reorientation of climate governance and the will to reach beyond governments and directly address wider society. Climate action by 'non-Party stakeholders' forms a core pillar of the Paris architecture,[15] and several processes have been created to that effect, including a dedicated web portal[16] and the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (MPGCA, launched in 2016), which aims at supporting initiatives of businesses and subnational governments to address climate change.

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[15] The Paris Agreement "welcomes the efforts of all non-Party stakeholders to address and respond to climate change" and invites non-state actors "to scale up their efforts" to mitigate and adapt to climate change (UNFCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1),
[16] https://climateaction.unfccc.int/

The tone and style of events at the Action Hub stood in stark contrast not only to the negotiations, but also to other side events. City mayors, investors, and foundations took it in turns to present their climate actions; startups and businesses introduced their latest technological solutions; young activists shared success stories of youth mobilization; and media channels committed to enhancing their coverage of climate issues. The agenda combined TED talk-style and talk show-like formats, as well as interactive events, movie projections, and artistic performances. Among these, the Global Climate Action Awards Ceremony on Tuesday in the second week stands out. Announced as a "marquee event" and ''a moment of celebration... with inspiring speakers, videos, photography, and a musical performance," it presented the 15 winners of the 2019 UN Global Climate Action Awards.[17] The projects rewarded included for instance a technological solution to generate energy from ocean waves and initiatives for women's empowerment in the agricultural sector, but also, more surprisingly, innovations aimed at making the food sector carbon neutral, such as the climate-positive menu proposed by the Swedish chain MAX Burgers. The event thereby contributed to establishing a powerful narrative of a groundswell of climate action driven by pioneering individuals and innovative companies. "People often have to see what climate action looks like, before they take action themselves", UNFCCC Deputy Executive Secretary Ovais Sarmad argued in his introductory statement. Hence, "agreements are needed, but these actions give them the meaning, give them the momentum they need". The moderator of the event, adventurer and entrepreneur Bertrand Piccard, concluded with similar enthusiasm – and a fair dose of pathos – that the current era is "either the period where we destroyed ourselves, or the one that we managed to save ourselves. If we look here, I think we can be optimistic. The whole first row is full with innovators that act now."

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[17] This initiative builds on the Momentum for Change Lighthouse Activity Awards, created in 2011, and is sponsored by the Rockefeller and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundations, Iberdola, and the World Economic Forum, among other organizations. Its stated aims are to "strengthen motivation, spur innovation, and catalyze further change towards a low-emission, high-resilient future".

Ambassadors of solutions and entrepreneurs of hope

Piccard, who participated in several high-profile events at COP25, represents a new type of actor in global climate governance.[18] A psychotherapist by training, the CEO of the Solar Impulse Foundation became famous for performing the first successful non-stop balloon and solar-powered flights around the globe. He presents himself as "a doer"[19] with close ties to the business world, and as an "ambassador of solutions,"[20] who aims at "giving hope and reasons to hope."[21] Other personalities from the business, political, and cultural spheres were present at the conference. Some, such as the Chilean "entrepreneur and social change-maker" Gonzalo Muñoz Abogabir,[22] were officially recruited by the UNFCCC as 'High-Level Champions' for climate action. This role was created in 2015 to encourage non-state climate action and link it to the UN process. The 'Champions' put their professional networks and celebrity in the service of climate action. Their enrolment by the UNFCCC can be interpreted as a form of "symbolic exchange" (Foyer and Dumoulin Kervran, 2017): the UN bureaucracy forges itself a more dynamic image and appears as a legitimate societal actor; in return, it provides social prestige and recognition to individual 'agents of change'.

This transformation also comes with a new language, borrowed from the world of business and social entrepreneurship. "There are the ones – let me call them capitalists – that are selfish. The more sensible among us, and I count you all among them, are betting on the change," said Paul Polman, CEO of IMAGINE, a consultancy on sustainability issues, at a business roundtable at the Action Hub.23 The former head of Unilever and the 2015 recipient of the UNEP Champions of Earth Award then exclaimed, "Climate change is the biggest business opportunity in the history of humankind!" Earlier at the same event, Jose Luis Blanco, CEO of Acciona Windpower, had argued that concerning climate change, "we see not the risk part, but the opportunity part." The same day in another room, the Programme Director of the Coalition for Urban Transitions, Nick Geoffrey, presented a report with strategies to "turn climate emergency into an opportunity" for urban job creation and return on investment.[24]

The pitfalls of climate PR and 'solutionism'

COP25 also provided a forum for existing initiatives to gain further visibility and membership. Earlier in 2019, the UN Global Climate Action Summit in New York had already provided an occasion for states, businesses, and local governments to make new pledges. Such ad hoc events do not, however, have the necessary infrastructure and personnel to monitor and support private initiatives after they are created.[25] Hence, the 'Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance', launched in New York to align investors' portfolios with a 1.5°C scenario, announced in Madrid that its membership had increased, now representing nearly

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[18] Similar evolutions exist in other fields of UN governance, as illustrated by the creation of 'Human Rights Champions', 'Champions of the Earth', etc.
[19] MPGCA Energy speech, 5 December, 2019.
[20] Energy Action Event, 7 December 2019
[21] Bertrand Picard, speaking about the winners of the 2019 UN Global Climate Action Awards.
[22] Founder of the company TriCiclos, specialised in waste management and recycling.
[23] Event on 'Business Ambition for 1.5°C and a Just Transition to a Net-Zero Emissions Economy', 9 December 2019.
[24] Side-event on 'NDCs and the Climate Emergency of Cities – Collaborative Climate action to Ratchet-up Ambition and Capture Urban Opportunities', 9 December 2019.
[25] Interview with Paul Watkinson at COP25, S.C. Aykut, 13 December 2019

US$4 trillion in assets under management.[26] The Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy, an initiative of different city networks coordinated by billionaire and former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, organized a series of side-events to showcase new local commitments and launch new partnerships. One example was the Global Climate City Challenge, supported by the European Investment Bank, which provides technical and financial support for innovative municipal mitigation and adaptation plans.

The general feeling communicated in Madrid was that "in many areas, business is moving faster than governments."[27] In the words of Luc Bas, the European Regional Director of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN): "negotiations seems [sic] to become a side event to the real action presented by non-state actors!"[28] And what could possibly be wrong with business and political leaders taking bold action and talking about it? A first caveat is that in a governance situation where the 'signal' becomes just as important as negotiation outcomes,[29] the staging of positive examples risks increasingly taking the form of strategic communication efforts, or 'climate PR'. The EU, for instance, eager to announce its 'Green Deal' in Madrid, used a series of procedural tricks to reach internal consensus. The legal and political status of the agreement thereby became increasingly blurry even to EU insiders. A second issue is that "solutionism" (Morozov 2013) gives the impression that complex social problems can be solved by technology alone. Countless statements at COP25 conveyed the image of climate policy as a process driven not by interests and conflicts, but by markets and a bottom-up innovation dynamic. In other words, we can keep watching (carbon neutral) Formula 1 and eat (climate-positive) burgers, and thereby take climate action. And yet, in most cases, it remains completely unclear how widespread a 'best practice', or how great the transformative potential of a 'green technology', actually is. Finally, COP25 and the Global Climate Action Summit showed that it might be overly simplistic to assume that highlighting private climate action would automatically increase state ambitions. While the focus on businesses and cities may momentarily divert public attention away from state commitments, it clearly was not sufficient to unlock political stalemate.

(Dis)Connections: revisiting the 'schism of reality'

The disconnections between the UN process and societal dynamics around the world were a recurrent theme at COP25. Speakers repeatedly referred to protests in Chile and France to illustrate what they depicted as a general rift between citizens and their governments. Others complained that national negotiation mandates seemed to be completely unchanged, despite growing civil society pressure and private climate action around the world. Indeed, negotiations were as arduous and slow as ever, and delegates showed no sign of urgency or will to compromise.

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[26] https://www.unepfi.org/net-zero-alliance/

[27] Paul Polman, Event on 'Business Ambition for 1.5°C and a Just Transition to a Net-Zero Emissions Economy', 9 December 2019.

[28] Tweet by Luc Bas, 18 January 2020: https://twitter.com/lucbas1/status/1218447694005514240

[29] "Perhaps most importantly, the ideal COP would send a positive signal(s) to the international community, including investors, regarding the Parties' and other stakeholders' direction of travel," notes Susan Biniaz, lead climate lawyer for the U.S. State Department from 1989 to 2017 and one of the architects of the Paris Agreement (Biniaz, 2020, 11).

Such disconnects have been analysed in the past, and indeed the Paris framework was introduced explicitly as a remedy to this situation (Aykut 2016). However, our observations at COP25 showed that the transition to the new framework has been accompanied by new tensions and conflicts, which partly stem from conflicting expectations and logics linked to the three new roles of UN climate governance – as accountant, admonisher and animator.

Bridging the gap between UN climate governance and global society

It is important to recall that global climate politics have long been characterised by a yawning gap between two spheres: one, a UN governance built on the imaginary of centralised and consensual 'management' of a global problem, and the other a reality characterized by the expansion of resource-intensive Western lifestyles, fierce economic competition between states, and unbridled exploitation of fossil fuel resources. This "schism of reality" (Aykut and Dahan 2015) has been rooted in an institutional setup that frames climate change as a global pollution problem, and that separates its political treatment from that of other closely linked global issues, such as trade, energy security, and fossil fuel production (Vogler 2016). The UNFCCC thus excludes some central themes, and the official negotiations consequently have a "filtering effect" on climate governance (Aykut and Castro 2017). As a result, the focus of climate talks is frequently on abstract frameworks and questions of process, while the regulation of major drivers of global GHG emissions – such as fossil fuel production, or economic globalization – is left to the discretion of the negotiating parties.

The US retreat from the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 further accentuated this gap, as the UNFCCC "ossified" (Depledge 2006) into a "slowness factory" (Aykut and Dahan, 2015), unable to react to the rapid transformations that affected the world economy and global energy production in the 2000s. Indeed, UN negotiations bodies create 'process constituencies' with an interest in keeping the process as such running and expanding. As senior COP official and member of the French delegation Paul Watkinson put it, "in the history of the COP, I remember only one body that was abolished… only to create two new ones."[30] Some of this might also be related to the fact that many issues are so controversial that the creation of an 'inclusive process' is the smallest common denominator for parties to agree on. Another reason why the UNFCCC has a tendency to maintain old arguments and structures is that when the conditions for full agreement around new ones may not be in place, using old approaches can keep everyone in the process. The US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement provides an example: as one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters, the US's contributions to the regime are crucial for the success of international efforts. As the US is to remain a member of the UNFCCC while leaving the Paris Agreement, this is an incentive for parties to keep alive old UNFCCC processes and mechanisms that are not directly related to the Paris Agreement, just to avoid cutting all American ties to the process, as one EU delegate put it in a private conversation.[31] However, this comes at the expense of an efficient move towards the new regime.

The Paris architecture represents an explicit attempt to overcome some of these disconnections. Its proponents ask the UNFCCC to act less as a central regulator, and more like a platform that encourages, supports, and facilitates public and private climate action. To enable the UN process to address new topics, attract new actors, and respond with greater flexibility to societal changes, the Paris framework

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[30] Interview with Paul Watkinson at COP25, S.C. Aykut, 13 December 2019
[31] Authors' notes at the informal consultation of the SBI/SBSTA on the scope of the next periodic review, 6 December 2019.

introduces a series of new instruments, such as the High-Level Champions and the Marrakech Partnership. COP25 also showed that despite a myriad of private initiatives and regular high-profile events like the 2019 Global Climate Action Summit, the UNFCCC remains the centre of gravity of global climate governance. The new setting, however, also creates new tensions, which are primarily linked to tensions between the three roles of the UNFCCC in post-Paris climate governance.

Role conflicts and new tensions

The wider political context required the COP25 to deliver on three rather different political outcomes and messages simultaneously: 1) taking stock of past achievements and failures, 2) upholding the urgency to act, and 3) reaffirming the positive narrative of an ongoing planetary transition to a 2°C, or even a 1.5°, world. These expectations of the COP are rooted in the emerging multifaceted character of the UN process as well as the "inherent inconsistencies" (Geden 2016) of the new regime, as characterized by the three roles described above: accountant, admonisher, and animator. COP25 disclosed inextricable tensions between these three roles that will continue to shape the future development of the UNFCCC. Tensions between these roles were apparent at various moments during the two weeks.
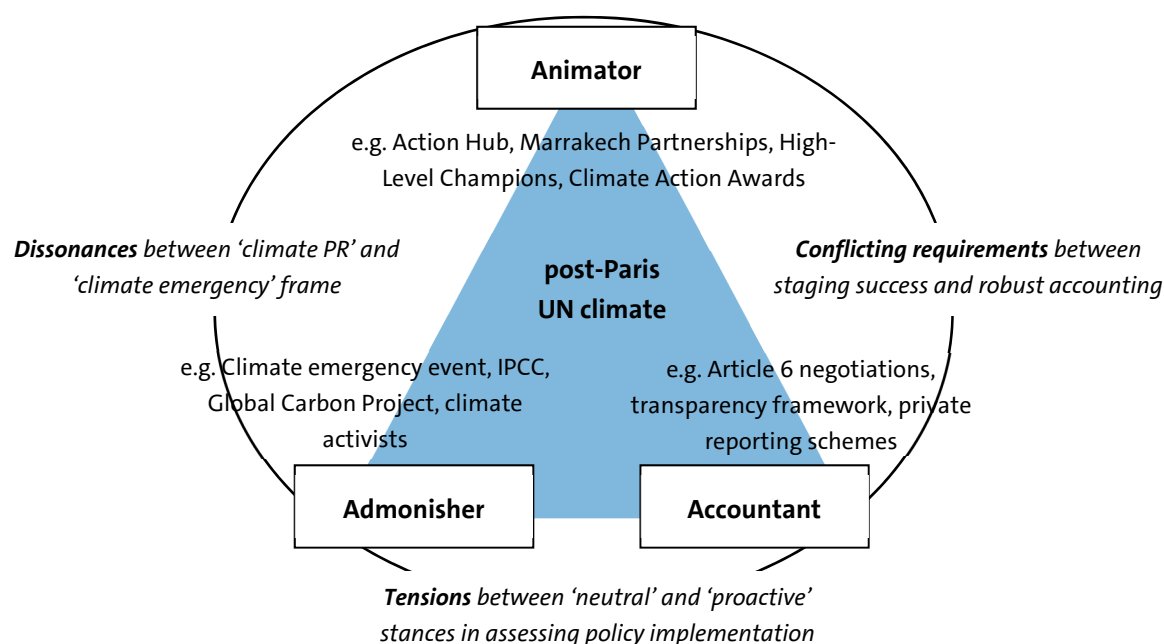

FIGURE 4   Figure 1: Roles and role-conflicts in UN climate governance

First, representatives of UN climate governance both evoked a 'climate emergency' and delivered motivational speeches to celebrate bottom-up climate action. The dissonance created by this strange simultaneity of otherwise incompatible messages was highlighted, among others, by Greta Thunberg during the climate emergency event: "The politics needed do not exist today, despite what you hear by political leaders," she said, adding that COPs are spaces for "clever accounting and clever PR". NGOs and social movements strongly voiced these concerns, both inside the COP venue and, once many had been expelled for protest actions inside, at its doors. In the final conference of the Fridays for Future

movement in December 14th, activists frontally accused the UNFCCC process of devoting undue space to "fake solutions" from "high polluters" at COPs, while at the same time side-lining, or even kicking out, "the people", and their claims for more political courage and justice in the face of climate change.[32] According to activists, both the space provided to companies at climate summits, and their financial support for the organisation of COPs, mean that the UNFCCC process lacks the necessary independence to objectively assess companies' climate actions and, more generally, the private sector's role in the climate crisis. This points to a second, closely related source of tensions, which resides in the contrast between the respective requirements of staging success stories and implementing rigorous accounting procedures. COP25 provided numerous examples illustrating that showcasing and positive messaging are often based on incomplete information, opaque accounting schemes, or flexible reporting strategies. Particularly striking in this regard were the 'climate-positive' initiatives presented by big corporations like Max Burger and Ikea.[33] Finally, the UNFCCC process is increasingly torn between its roles as a 'recording chamber' (or accountant) that tracks its signatories' climate ambitions, and a more proactive role as admonisher that tries to increase the pressure on them. One illustrative example of this is the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C. The UNFCCC's decision to invite the IPCC to compile this report just prior to the 2020 'update' of NDCs provoked harsh criticism, not only from fossil fuel-dependent countries such as Saudi Arabia,[34] but also from scientists (Guillemot 2017). The intense debate that unfolded at COP24 in Katowice on whether the COP should 'welcome' or only 'note' the report highlights these tensions.

The examples for the tensions between the three roles of UN climate governance outlined above could be complemented by many others. What is already clear from this brief overview, however, is how the potentially antagonistic relationship between the expectations attached to each of these roles might lead to substantial conflicts in the future. It is to be anticipated that these tensions and conflicts will shape the future of the UNFCCC, and of global climate governance in general.

Climate governance at the crossroads: three future scenarios

The Madrid climate summit illustrates a growing disconnect between a slow and procedural UN arena and the dynamics and demands of global society. Indeed, the period between the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 and the entry into force of its mechanisms five years later has been marked by a resurgence of old conflicts and the appearance of new tensions. In the leadup to COP26 in Glasgow, where countries are expected to update their policy pledges, this sheds serious doubt on the capacity of UN climate governance to effectively catalyse the necessary decarbonisation of global economic activity. The current situation therefore raises important questions about the future of global climate politics: what are possible prospects for the evolution of multilateral cooperation and transnational climate action? And can we identify specific social and political conditions that would make the materialisation of these respective futures more probable?

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[32] Observation notes, 14.12.2019.
[33] See the respective websites: https://www.maxburgers.com/climate-positive/climate-positive/; https://about.ikea.com/en/sustainability/becoming-climate-positive/what-is-climate-positive
[34] See the *Carbon Brief* interview with Saudi-Arabian delegate Ayman Shasly during COP24: https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-interview-saudi-arabias-ayman-shasly

In order to anticipate future developments and stimulate debate on present-day political options, we explore three stylized scenarios, which we refer to as 'hollowing out', 'fragmentation' and 'metamorphosis'. The scenarios describe the state of global climate governance between now and the start of the next decade. They differ in the degree to which the UN process proves capable of managing its own transformation, as well as in the strength and momentum of climate action outside the UNFCCC. Moreover, they also reflect differences in wider political dynamics, as the world moves towards or away from multilateral cooperation. Regardless of the scenario, we expect an overall intensification of the climate crisis.

Hollowing Out

The first scenario describes an increasingly polarised world, in which the UN process continues, but proves unable to deliver effective governance. The ratcheting-up mechanism, rather than significantly increasing ambition, offers little more than cosmetic changes. Emissions continue to rise and climate conflicts intensify, both across and within countries.

The starting point for this evolution is a serious deadlock in climate talks in the years after COP25. A growing rift separates countries in which civil society pressure in favour of climate action intensifies and states where right-wing populists impose nationalist and anti-environmentalist agendas. Trust among countries and in the UN process diminishes, and risks bringing the transition to the Paris framework to a halt. When a series of countries threaten to follow the US's example and leave the treaty, the EU and others finally accept weakened rules for global carbon markets. While this saves the agreement, it also creates new loopholes. This situation dashes hopes for a 'race to the top' in global climate action. While the dynamic for private climate action continues in some sectors and regions, it dissipates or never takes off in other areas of global economic life. Uncertainty for firms increases, and the global struggle over climate policy produces a growing number of winners and losers among investors and workers. This in turn fuels further polarisation of societies.

When scientific studies conducted for the first global stocktake in 2023 show that the 2°C threshold is no longer within reach, the 'Paris prophecy' collapses. Positive storytelling during COPs gives way to increasingly catastrophic scenarios. Negotiations are paralysed by proxy struggles between fossil fuel-dependent states and climate frontrunners in the global North, as well as between developed countries and a growing group of Southern countries adopting a radical climate justice agenda. For the first time, a number of countries and NGOs refuse to participate in the annual COPs. Some representatives join the annual global climate strikes, while others shift their attention to the private sector: boycotts and civil disobedience become more frequent, and companies face significant reputational and material losses. Moreover, unilateral climate initiatives create new tensions. The EU's introduction of a border-adjustment tax and unilateral geoengineering experiments by some countries drive a spiral of sanctions and global trade wars. These conflicts contribute to a general gridlock in multilateralism, illustrated by the failure of successive G20 meetings.

The 'hollowing out' of the UNFCCC is particularly manifest with regard to adaptation. While developing states ritually demand additional, adequate, and predictable public finance, developed countries refer to the necessity to mobilise funds from private sources. As climate impacts become ever more evident, some parties propose to separate discussions on mitigation and adaption into different political forums. However, due to the increasing polarization of climate talks, compromises are no longer seen as likely. Instead, South-South cooperation schemes are initiated by major emerging economies. Issues of loss

and damage are also increasingly brought before courts, where vulnerable countries obtain a series of victories. Due to a lack of universally recognised multilateral institutions capable of enforcing legal claims, these remain mostly symbolic.

Fragmentation

In the second scenario, UN climate talks continue and occasionally garner some wider attention, but fail to 'connect the dots' of transnational climate action. Emissions reach a plateau, as climate governance increasingly diffuses into other global, regional, national and subnational arenas. However, the lack of strong accounting rules and adequate adaptation finance creates new tensions between vulnerable developing countries and big emitters from both the global North and South.

In this case, the years after COP25 are marked by an increasingly uncompromising negotiation strategy by major emerging economies, which refuse to apply strict accounting and reporting rules after the US's withdrawal. When finally completed, the Paris framework therefore remains weak, and compromise on global carbon markets creates new loopholes for countries and firms. Hence, states – both more and less progressive – form loose alliances on specific themes, and climate governance increasingly moves out of the UNFCCC and into other arenas. While, in the symbolic fray, almost all topics become "climatised" (Aykut et al. 2017), their treatment is differentiated according to actor groups and policy venues. This fragmentation favours strategies of "forum shopping" (Busch 2007), as actors pick and choose between different alliances, initiatives, accounting standards, and reporting rules, in line with their interests. COPs evolve more and more into empty rituals full of motivational rhetoric: actors stage success stories, best practices and technological solutions, without having to fear independent scrutiny. But the distortion of reporting in favour of overly optimistic assessments also creates a lack of credibility. Private climate action thereby remains largely symbolic, and proves unable to drive a dynamic toward deep decarbonisation.

The growing disconnect between climate PR and effective climate action becomes evident by the mid-2020s. Although states regularly reaffirm their commitment to the UNFCCC, durable polarisation in the US and other countries does not allow for anything more than "episodic multilateralism" (Victor and Jones 2018). Critical NGOs and a coalition of vulnerable Southern countries therefore call for the formation of 'climate emergency coalitions' bringing together progressive states and firms. Fossil fuel infrastructures and companies increasingly become the target of climate activism and civil disobedience. However, while a number of large companies substantially reduce their emissions, others merely provide lip service and engage in greenwashing. With regard to national pledges, the picture is mixed: countries that joined climate emergency coalitions tend to exceed their pledges and submit ever more ambitious decarbonisation plans, while others fail to reach their targets and submit only marginally updated NDCs.

By the end of the 2020s, the UN process is no longer considered as central, and media attention and policy interest have dispersed into other arenas. Questions pertaining to the social consequences of decarbonisation policies, for instance, are discussed in an international dialogue on the 'just transition', under the umbrella of the G20. On adaption too, various new initiatives are launched outside the UNFCCC. Increasingly catastrophic warming impacts motivate some Northern and large Southern countries to provide bilateral climate finance in minimally bureaucratic ways. In addition, philanthropic funds mobilise increasing amounts of money for private adaptation schemes, negative emissions

projects and small geoengineering projects. Such initiatives, however, also generate criticism, with some likening them to a form of 'climate colonialism', and constitute the source of new conflicts.

Metamorphosis

In this scenario, the UNFCCC successfully completes its transition to the Paris framework, and the ratcheting-up mechanism for national pledges works as intended. A mix of strong state regulations, massive public investments, and private climate action leads to the decarbonisation of entire economic sectors. Hence, global emissions begin to decrease for the first time.

The positive dynamic is initiated in the early 2020s, when successive COPs become the theatre of a 'race to the top' in public and private climate action. Growing civil society protests in major developed countries lead to the adoption of ambitious and innovative climate policies, which combine robust carbon pricing schemes, national 'Green New Deals', and, in some countries, the nationalisation of key industries in the energy and transport sector. Governments with low-ambition NDCs experience increasing public pressure from climate activists, but also from economic lobbies that fear being excluded from the rapidly growing global market for climate solutions.

By the first global stocktake, COPs – now termed 'Climate Action Summits' – become massive global events that take place every two years. Multilateral negotiations are only one aspect of these gatherings, which gain increasing importance for businesses and subnational governments as the place for coordinating initiatives, staging policies and presenting new technologies. No major political or economic organisation can afford not to be represented there. In the private sector, high-emitting companies are increasingly exposed to rigorous accounting, public campaigns and global boycotts. Economic rationalities are changing, as the reduction of emissions and other environmental impacts become central components of strategic decisions. Moreover, debates on a 'just transition' gain traction in the negotiations, as the social impacts of decarbonisation strategies become more and more visible.

But despite these positive developments, it becomes obvious by the end of the decade that the prospects of negative emissions technologies and 'nature-based solutions' have been massively overestimated. Consequently, new international initiatives within and outside the UNFCCC aim at extending the scope of climate action by directly regulating fossil fuel extraction and combustion, and by aligning trade agreements with climate protection priorities. The insight that warming beyond the critical thresholds of 1.5°C, and possibly even 2°C, can no longer be avoided, contributes to making adaptation and loss and damage central topics in climate talks. NGOs and countries from the global South now advocate for a direct, legally binding link between the projected temperature overshoot and the amount of adaptation finance that developed countries have to provide. The issue becomes one of the major sources of political conflict in the UNFCCC. However, the discussion space provided by the reformed Paris framework offers opportunities to build trust and find negotiated solutions.

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