

The UN's Annual Climate Conference

A primer on how to make sense of COP

By Henri Schneider*

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I remember the first Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP) I participated in.¹ It was back in 2012 in Doha, Qatar. I felt like a mouse running in a maze, solving riddles to get to the next complex of tunnels. In that case, the challenge was intellectual and practical since part of the conference center was underground.

The sheer amount of people, meetings, issues, and events makes the navigation of any COP daunting. Even today, whenever I attend one, I continue to be perplexed. Hence, this primer, in the style of a Q&A, is intended to explain how COPs work, as the 28th COP (COP28) looms on the horizon, starting on November 30 in Dubai.²



Heads of delegations at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21), which led to the signing of the Paris Agreement. Source: Wikipedia.

Who convenes the meeting?

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an international treaty aimed at addressing the issue of climate change.³ It was adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 and entered into force in 1994.⁴ The UNFCCC provides the overall framework for global efforts to deal with climate change and serves as the foundation for subsequent international agreements and protocols related to climate action.⁵

What meetings take place at a COP?

There are many conferences or meetings taking place at the same time, and referring to these as a COP is technically wrong. During such a climate summit, several bodies meet.⁶ They are:

COP - Conference of the Parties. The COP is the highest decision-making body of the UNFCCC. It meets annually and brings together representatives from almost every country. The COP is responsible for making critical decisions on climate policy, setting emissions reduction targets, and negotiating international climate agreements. In Dubai, it will be the 28th meeting of the COP, therefore COP28.

SBSTA - Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice. SBSTA provides scientific and technical advice to the COP. It assesses the latest scientific information on climate change and advises on technological matters related to climate action. The SBSTA meets at least once between COPs. For this reason, Dubai is its 59th meeting – SBSTA 59.

¹ Some of the content in this paper is based on the author's first-hand experience.

² "COP28 UAE Frequently asked questions," COP28 web site, <https://www.cop28.com/en/cop28-faqs> (accessed November 6, 2023).

³ "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," United Nations (1992) https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf.

⁴ "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992," <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992> United Nations (1992) and "What is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change?" United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change#:~:text=The%2520UNFCCC%2520entered%2520into%2520force,ultimate%2520of%2520the%2520UNFCCC> (accessed November 6, 2023).

⁵ "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (1992). https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf.

⁶ "UN Climate Change Conference - United Arab Emirates Nov/Dec 2023," United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/Cop28#Sessions> (accessed November 6, 2023).

SBI - Subsidiary Body for Implementation. SBI assists the COP in implementing the Convention's provisions. It considers issues related to financial and administrative matters and reports and reviews countries' climate actions. Dubai also is the SBI's 59th meeting – SBI 59.

CMP - Conference of the Parties Serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. The CMP is a subsidiary body of the UNFCCC that was established to oversee the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol. The Kyoto Protocol, adopted in 1997, was the first international treaty to set emission reduction targets for developed countries (Annex I countries) during a specific commitment period.⁷ This is the CMP's 18th meeting, hence CMP 18.

CMA - Conference of the Parties Serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement. The CMA is a subsidiary body of the UNFCCC responsible for overseeing and governing the implementation of the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement was adopted in 2015 and sets out specific commitments for countries to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to the impacts of climate change, and enhance global climate resilience.⁸ Since it is the fifth meeting of the CMA, it is called CMA 5.

Why is COP28 in Dubai?

In the United Nations, countries are organized in regional groups.⁹ The COP alternates between them. In 2021, the “Western European and other States” chose to organize the COP in Glasgow, UK. In 2022, the “African States” held the COP in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt. In 2023, the “Asia-Pacific States” invited Parties to Dubai, United Arab Emirates. In 2024, the “Eastern European States” will be holding the event, and in 2025, it is going to be in Brazil for the “Latin American and Caribbean States.”¹⁰

How are the meetings structured?

The agenda of each body gives the structure of all meetings in the COP.¹¹ Each agenda consists of several agenda items. In the first two days of the summit, all bodies convene in a plenary, opening their agendas. This means Parties give the mandate to the presidency of the body to appoint two chairs or facilitators for each agenda item – one from a so-called developed and the other from a so-called developing country Party.

The plenaries then dissolve, and each agenda item is negotiated for roughly 10 days. The first four to five days are so-called technical negotiations. The last five days are for political negotiations. This differentiation has almost no practical role. In reality, in the first half of the meeting, views diverge. The second half is used to create consensus and close the agenda items.

Each agenda item is negotiated and a text is produced that is submitted to the bodies to which the item belongs. As the agenda items are closed, the five bodies mentioned above reconvene in a plenary, adopting the texts submitted by the agenda items in a decision. The final plenary is the COP, which serves as the steering body of the UNFCCC.

Who negotiates what?

Only Parties to the UNFCCC are allowed to sit at the negotiation table. Other organizations such as climate activists or business groups can be on the premises of the negotiations and even, if no Party objects, enter the negotiation rooms. But those organizations cannot negotiate.¹²

Each country Party has a delegation of negotiators. Larger delegations have at least one negotiator for each agenda item. These specialized negotiators often do not follow anything but their items. For example, the negotiator for the agenda item “transparency” might not know anything about the discussions under the item “climate finance.” Smaller delegations often specialize in the most essential items from the respective Party's point of view.

⁷ “Marking the Kyoto Protocol's 25th anniversary,” United Nations Climate Action, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/marking-kyoto-protocol's-25th-anniversary#:~:text=The%20Kyoto%20Protocol%2C%20the%20first,1997%2C%20in%20in%20Kyoto%2C%20Japan> (accessed November 6, 2023).

⁸ “The Paris Agreement,” United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement> (accessed November 6, 2023).

⁹ “Regional groups of Member States,” United Nations Department for General Assembly and Conference Management web site, <https://www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/regional-groups> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹⁰ “COP 27 agenda item 2(g)” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/event/cop-27?item=2%20g> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹¹ For this answer regarding the structure of meetings, in addition to the author's first-hand experience, see e.g. “COP28,” United Nations Climate Change web site <https://unfccc.int/event/cop-28> (accessed November 6, 2023); “SBSTA59,” United Nations Climate Change web site <https://unfccc.int/event/sbsta-59> (accessed November 6, 2023); “SBI59,” United Nations Climate Change web site <https://unfccc.int/event/sbi-59> (accessed November 6, 2023); “CMP18,” United Nations Climate Change web site <https://unfccc.int/event/cmp-18> (accessed November 6, 2023); “CMA5,” United Nations Climate Change web site <https://unfccc.int/event/cma-5> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹² For this answer, in addition to the author's first-hand experience, see e.g. “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Handbook,” United Nations (2006) <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/handbook.pdf> and other citations contained in the answer.

Each delegation has a head or lead negotiator. Some delegations have sub-leaders overseeing the negotiations of different agenda items. Leadership usually negotiates plenary-level issues or particularly problematic situations that technical negotiators cannot solve.

Usually, Parties are part of a larger negotiation group (not: regional groups), for example, the European Union or the G77 plus China, the group of 77 developing countries and China. The US is part of the Umbrella Group. It is a coalition of Parties formed following the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol. The Group comprises Australia, Canada, Iceland, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Kazakhstan, Norway, Ukraine, and the United States.¹³ The UK formally joined the group in 2023.¹⁴ Even when belonging to a group, each Party maintains its full autonomy. Some Parties belong to several negotiation groups.¹⁵

How do the negotiations proceed?

In the plenaries, each delegation sits behind their Party's flag. Heads of delegation and ministers can speak, but they will have an allotted time of three minutes and can only make one statement per agenda item.

When the plenaries dissolve, and the individual agenda items are negotiated, negotiators break out into several negotiation rooms. These simultaneous discussions are more informal and more controversial than in the plenary. Any negotiator can ask for the floor at any time, as often as they deem necessary. Any Party can submit text and negotiate any part of the text submitted by others.

In this phase of negotiations, the schedule is often rudimentary. Sessions can go on for hours, and usually, there are three to four all-nighters for any agenda item. In principle, there is a structure for this part of negotiations. Each agenda item opens and closes with a Contact Group and deliberates in Informal Sessions. Since these "Informals" usually do not suffice timewise, the bulk of negotiations is done in so-called Informal Informals.¹⁶

Who attends the COP?

The COP and all the other meetings taking place simultaneously is a meeting of Parties to the UNFCCC. Therefore, only Parties "must" participate. In COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, over 35,000 people were present. According to the UNFCCC's statistics, around 21,000 people were Party delegates, *i.e.*, negotiators. Another 12,000 people were observers, usually from non-governmental organizations. The last 2,000 people were from the media.¹⁷

Looking closely at the non-governmental organizations, some 40 percent of these observers belong to climate activist groups. Another 25 percent came from academic backgrounds such as universities and research institutes. Some 15 percent represent the business and industry sectors. The remaining 20 percent belong to groups such as farmers, labor unions, women and gender and youth groups, and indigenous populations.¹⁸

Per standing policy, anyone can be an observer to the COP. But these people are expected to register to cover their costs. As for what observers do, that is another question. They consider themselves pressure groups influencing the negotiators. But their presence, from the negotiator's point of view, is remedial. In Warsaw in 2014, most observers walked away to protest some issues. Negotiators only became aware of this "strike" on its second day due to the absence of queues in the dining facilities.¹⁹

Observers often liaise between themselves, organize events (called side events), and showcase their activities. Some use the COP to gain media presence, and others to attract donors.

How are decisions adopted?

The COP makes decisions using the United Nations modalities, *i.e.*, a decision is adopted when there is a consensus between the Parties. Consensus means no Party opposes. In the negotiations on agenda items, a decision text is discussed and reformulated as many times as necessary to secure no opposition to it by any Party. If such a text is forwarded to the final plenaries, it is usually passed without further discussion.

¹³ "Party Groupings," United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/parties/party-groupings> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹⁴ "Party Groupings," United Nations Climate Change web site.

¹⁵ "Party Groupings," United Nations Climate Change web site.

¹⁶ See e.g. "A day in the life of an observer at COP: An observer handbook for COP 27," United Nations Observer Relations Team, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Observer%20handbook%20for%20COP27.pdf> (December 11, 2022).

¹⁷ "Statistics on Participation and in-session engagement," United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-participation-and-in-session-engagement> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹⁸ See e.g. "Observer organizations," United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/overview/observer-organizations> (accessed November 6, 2023) and "Statistics on Participation and in-session engagement," United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-participation-and-in-session-engagement> (accessed November 6, 2023).

¹⁹ This is based on the author's first-hand experience.

More problematic are the proposals in which there is no consensus. There can be a lack of agreement regarding a whole decision or some parts. The latter is better known as bracketed text. The practice is to signal the absence of consensus by putting the text in square brackets. If there is no agreement on a whole agenda item, the bracket will comprise its whole text.

Bracketed texts are the more challenging parts of the negotiation. Lead negotiators and ministers try to establish a workable compromise between themselves in the last days of the meetings. If an agreement is reached, the text is adopted as a decision. If no agreement can be found, the whole text is rejected, and the agenda item is referred to the next meeting for further negotiation.

In any case, any Party can signal a lack of consensus at any time. The whole system is Party-driven, *i.e.*, the COP's presidency, the chairs or facilitators cannot, at any time, decide. Also, there are no majority votes and anything similar.

What are the significant issues of COP28?

There will be, as usual, an immense number of agenda items to treat. Any of the bodies mentioned above has at least 15 items, and some have 75 or more individual topics to negotiate.²⁰ Most of them are technical, dealing, for example, with how to set up registers for carbon markets or which guidance to give to the Climate Technology Center and Network. However, there will be a few essential topics with far-reaching consequences.²¹ They are:

Loss and damage. There is a question of how much money developed Parties are transferring to developing Parties

to compensate for their losses because they have been unable to develop the way developed Parties did. At COP27, governments agreed to set up a fund, which now needs to be operationalized.

Climate finance. High-income countries have long been criticized for failure to meet their annual goal— set in 2009 at COP15 — to mobilize \$100 billion to be transferred to global climate action.²²

Early warnings. At COP27, the UN launched an ambitious plan to set up a global early warnings system.²³ To ensure implementation, UN Secretary-General António Guterres is establishing an advisory board co-chaired by the heads of the World Meteorological Organization and the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.²⁴

Global Stocktake.²⁵ The first Global Stocktake — a process for taking stock of the implementation of the Paris Agreement globally — will end at COP28. This process has also been labeled the “name and shame” process. Countries are assessed by their peers and are then called to scale up their climate ambitions and actions.

GGA - Global Goal on Adaptation. The Paris Agreement established the Global Goal on Adaptation to drive collective action on climate adaptation.²⁶ At COP26, countries agreed to launch a two-year work program to translate the GGA into concrete actions.²⁷ At COP27, countries established a framework for achieving the GGA. The framework will be discussed during workshops in the lead-up to COP28 and should be considered and adopted at COP28 in November.

Food systems. At COP27, countries agreed on a new four-year agriculture and food security plan.²⁸ The new plan is the successor to the Koronivia Joint Work on Agriculture, established in 2017.²⁹ Some G77 countries oppose widening the climate agriculture pact.³⁰

²⁰ See e.g. “COP 28,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/event/cop-28> (accessed November 6, 2023); “SBSTA 59,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/event/sbsta-59> (accessed November 6, 2023); “CMP 18,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/event/cmp-18> (accessed November 6, 2023); “SBI 59,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/event/sbi-59> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²¹ See also “COP28 Resources Hub: Key Issues to Watch at COP28,” World Resources Institute, <https://www.wri.org/un-climate-change-conference-resource-hub/key-issues-watch-cop28#:~:text=A%20Rapid%20Response%20Plan%20to,land%20use%2C%20and%20resilience> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²² “Climate finance and the USD 100 billion goal: Insights to date and opportunities looking ahead,” OECD, October 27, 2022, <https://www.oecd-events.org/cop27/session/f9ead97c-4e49-ed11-819a-000d3a45c4a7/climate-finance-and-the-usd-100-billion-goal-insights-to-date-and-opportunities-looking-ahead#:~:text=At%20COP15%20in%202009%2C%20developed,measuring%20progress%20towards%20this%20goal>. (accessed November 6, 2023).

²³ “Fast-tracking global Early Warnings systems,” United Nations Africa Renewal, April, 2023 [https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2023/fast-tracking-global-early-warnings-systems#:~:text=The%20Early%20Warnings%20For%20All%20Initiative%20\(EW4All\)%20was%20formally%20launched,by%20the%20end%20of%202027](https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/april-2023/fast-tracking-global-early-warnings-systems#:~:text=The%20Early%20Warnings%20For%20All%20Initiative%20(EW4All)%20was%20formally%20launched,by%20the%20end%20of%202027) (accessed November 6, 2023) and “COP27: \$3.1 billion plan to achieve early warning systems for all by 2027,” United Nations News, November 7, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130277> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²⁴ “COP27: \$3.1 billion plan to achieve early warning systems for all by 2027,” United Nations News, November 7, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/11/1130277> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²⁵ “Global Stocktake,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/topics/global-stocktake> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²⁶ “Glasgow-Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the global goal on adaptation,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/glasgow-sharm-el-sheikh-WP-GGGA> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²⁷ “Glasgow-Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the global goal on adaptation,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/workstreams/glasgow-sharm-el-sheikh-WP-GGGA> (accessed November 6, 2023).

²⁸ “Governments Step Up Action on Agriculture and Food Security at COP27,” United Nations Climate Change News, December 5, 2022, <https://unfccc.int/news/governments-step-up-action-on-agriculture-and-food-security-at-cop27>.

²⁹ “Koronivia joint work on agriculture,” United Nations Climate Change web site, <https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/agriculture/KJWA> (accessed November 6, 2023).

³⁰ See e.g. „Exclusive: Some G77 Countries Oppose Widening Climate Agriculture Pact,” Devex, 15 November, 2022, <https://www.devex.com/news/exclusive-some-g77-countries-oppose-widening-climate-agriculture-pact-104439>.

Conclusion

There is a lot of terminology and many process issues to keep track of for those following or involved in a COP. It can be tricky even for those with significant COP experience. As COP28 takes place, and future COPs occur in the future, this primer will hopefully serve as a useful source to navigate its complexity.

Appendix A: Useful web resources for COP28

Meeting agenda:

<https://unfccc.int/cop28#sessions>

Note: all in-session documents are available to the public and are quickly uploaded under that link.

Thematic program for high-level talks and side events:

<https://unfccc.int/cop28#schedules-and-public-webcast>

Note: While these events do not influence the negotiations, they take place during the COP to project importance and to give issues or people publicity.

Registration and participation:

<https://unfccc.int/cop28#attend>

Note: Anyone interested should apply as quickly as possible.

Global Stocktake:

<https://unfccc.int/topics/global-stocktake>

The Stocktake is a little understood, dynamic part of the Paris Agreement.

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