

From Contribution Framework to Ambition Mechanism

How to enhance mitigation
ambition under the Paris Agreement

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I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

In the years preceding the adoption of the Paris Agreement, a key question that preoccupied many negotiators was: how can the new agreement build in flexibility for countries to increase the ambition of their mitigation “contributions” (as national actions are now called in the climate negotiations), even after they have communicated them as “nationally determined contributions” (NDCs)?

This question was discussed by a number of senior developing country negotiators at the [ecbi Oxford Fellowships and Seminar](#) in August 2014. The negotiators considered the domestic challenges often faced in the context of announcing such an international contribution. For instance, many of them pointed out that once contributions are decided nationally and inscribed internationally, they are “politically locked-in” – they have been endorsed at the highest political level nationally, and thereafter they cannot be changed.

To overcome such hurdles, the negotiators came up with the idea of a “[Dynamic Contribution Cycle](#)” (DCC). They proposed a cycle based on ten-year periods, but with two five-year contribution terms. At the beginning of each cycle, a country would “inscribe” its contribution for the five years immediately following the start of the cycle, but only “communicate” the contribution for the following five years. As the contribution for the second (five-year) contribution term would only be an initial announcement, not yet fully endorsed at the political level, it would still be flexible and could be ratcheted up before it is finally inscribed – thus increasing ambition.

The DCC idea was subsequently elaborated in an ecbi policy brief with Xolisa Ngwadla, South Africa, and Jose Miguez, Brazil, as lead authors. Brazil then went on to make a national submission to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on 6 November 2014, proposing the DCC for inclusion in the new Agreement. The submission, [Views of Brazil on the Elements of the New Agreement under the Convention applicable to All Parties](#), eloquently makes the case for an ambition mechanism in the climate agreement:

“The agreement itself must provide for the procedures to enhance ambition over time [...] Brazil recognizes it is important to avoid ‘locking in’ contributions in the long term. It is also important to avoid that successive cycles of contributions become subject to renegotiations and political bargaining. With a view to addressing these issues, Brazil proposes a ‘dynamic contribution cycle’, based on ten-year periods, with two five-year contribution terms. The purpose of this approach is to allow the adjustment of contributions with a view to enhance ambition, while providing long term perspectives for Parties and stakeholders.” [p.8]

The main “ambition” element of the DCC, therefore, was the provision of **shorter-term predictability** through the inscription of the five-year term contributions, with a **medium-term indication** of how the contributions are going to evolve (thus avoiding the element of surprise every five years).

The DCC idea eventually proved to be a key influence on what might be called the “Contribution Framework” of the Paris Outcome (which comprises the Paris Agreement and Decision 1/CP21).¹ This policy brief analyses the extent to which the Paris Agreement takes on board the ambition element of the DCC, and proposes a simple step that will enhance the ambition element further in the Agreement.

Although the Paris Agreement includes the notions of “communicating” and “updating” contributions, the full ambition potential envisaged in the DCC is not realised because of the two different tracks in the Agreement: a five-year time frame (paragraph 23, or §23, of the Paris Outcome); and a ten-year time frame (§24) track. This division may have been necessary because of the envisaged different time frames in the NDCs, but a

certain degree of harmonisation is essential to allow for countries to increase their ambition between the communicating and updating stages. This policy brief finds that this harmonisation can still be achieved, simply **by requesting all Parties to communicate a 2035 NDC and to update their 2030 NDC in 2025, and to do so every five years thereafter**. This harmonisation would turn the Paris Contribution Framework into a Dynamic Ambition Mechanism, harnessing all the advantages of the DCC proposal despite the Framework's two different time frames.

2. THE PARIS CONTRIBUTION FRAMEWORK

Article 14 of the Paris Agreement and paragraphs (§§) 22-25 of the accompanying decision establish a framework of five-year cycles for communicating, reviewing and updating NDCs – here collectively referred to as the “**(Paris) Contribution Framework**”. This section offers some terminology and definitions that can be used to describe this framework, and then describes and analyses its key elements.

Terminology and definitions

For the purposes of this analysis, the Paris Contribution Framework is sub-divided into two cycles: “communication/updating” of NDCs, and “review” of NDCs.

To refer to particular periods of the Contribution Framework and to identify particular NDCs, we need some additional basic terminology.

The Outcome associates NDCs with “**time frames and/or periods of implementation**” (§27). While no explicit definition of these two concepts is given, the Outcome language suggests that both are (multi-year) periods ending in multiples of 5 (namely in 2025, 2030, 2035, and so on). Moreover, it would seem to be reasonable to interpret “time frame” as the time span used in defining an NDC, and “period of implementation” as the period in which it is to be implemented.² It can also safely be assumed that the period of implementation of an NDC ends at the same time as its time frame. These common end years can thus be used to identify NDCs, for instance, by defining that:

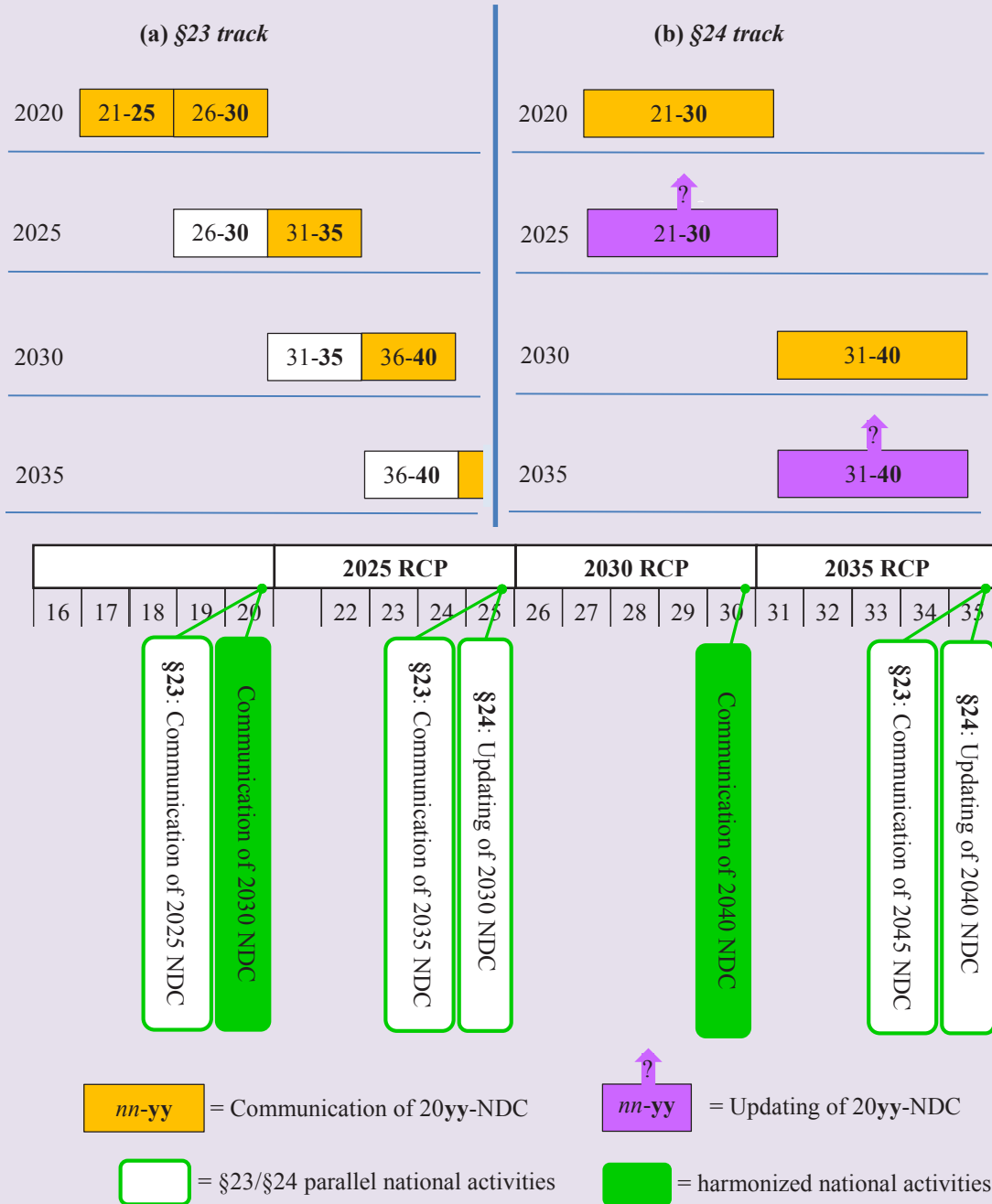
- “2025 NDC” refers to an NDC with a time frame or period of implementation ending in 2025.

The second loose end to be tied up is where to set the beginning/end of what we call the “**Review and Communication Periods**” (RCPs) of the Contribution Framework. This, of course, is essentially a matter of definition, but it seems reasonable to synchronize them with the above-mentioned time frame/period of implementation end points. So we could, for instance, define that:

- “2025 RCP” refers to the RCP between 2021 to 2025.

Based on these definitions, we can begin to describe and analyse the two cycles of the Contribution Framework (communication/updating, and review).

Figure 1. Communicating/Updating Cycles with mid-term §24 updates



Communicating/Updating Cycles

The Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) submitted to date have five- and ten-year time frames. To accommodate both time frames, the Outcome specifies communication or updating of NDCs in two different paragraphs: §23 for Parties with an INDC time frame up to 2025 (which we can call **§23-Parties**), and §24 for those with an INDC time frame of up to 2030 (**§24-Parties**). By 2020:

- §23-Parties are urged to communicate “a new NDC and to do so every five years thereafter”;
- §24-Parties are requested “to communicate or update” their 2030 (I)NDCs “and to do so every five years thereafter”.

According to §22, INDCs will automatically be deemed to be initial NDCs (unless otherwise specified by the Party in question). It is therefore generally assumed that the “new NDC” mentioned in §23 refers to a 2030 NDC. This means that by 2020, §23-Parties will have communicated two NDCs – a 2025 NDC, and a 2030 NDC. By 2025, they will have communicated their 2035 NDC, by 2030 their 2040 NDC, and so on. Therefore, §23-Parties will always have communicated two future NDCs: one 5 years, the other 10 years ahead.

§24-Parties, in turn, are requested to look at their 2030 INDCs and, by 2020, either communicate them as their 2030 NDCs or update them. A question then arises: what are they meant to be doing at the end of the 2025 RCP, i.e. what are they meant to communicate by 2025?

While there could be a number of options, the most probable is that they will be doing a “mid-term review” of their 2030 NDC – that is to say, they would either confirm or update the 2030 NDC. By the end of the 2030 RCP, they would presumably communicate a new 2040 NDC. Figure 1 illustrates what might be considered the two most probable “Communicating/Updating Cycles” (with mid-term §24 updates) in conformance with the Paris Outcome. There are many others that Parties could choose, some of which would allow more room for ambition than others (discussed later in this policy brief).

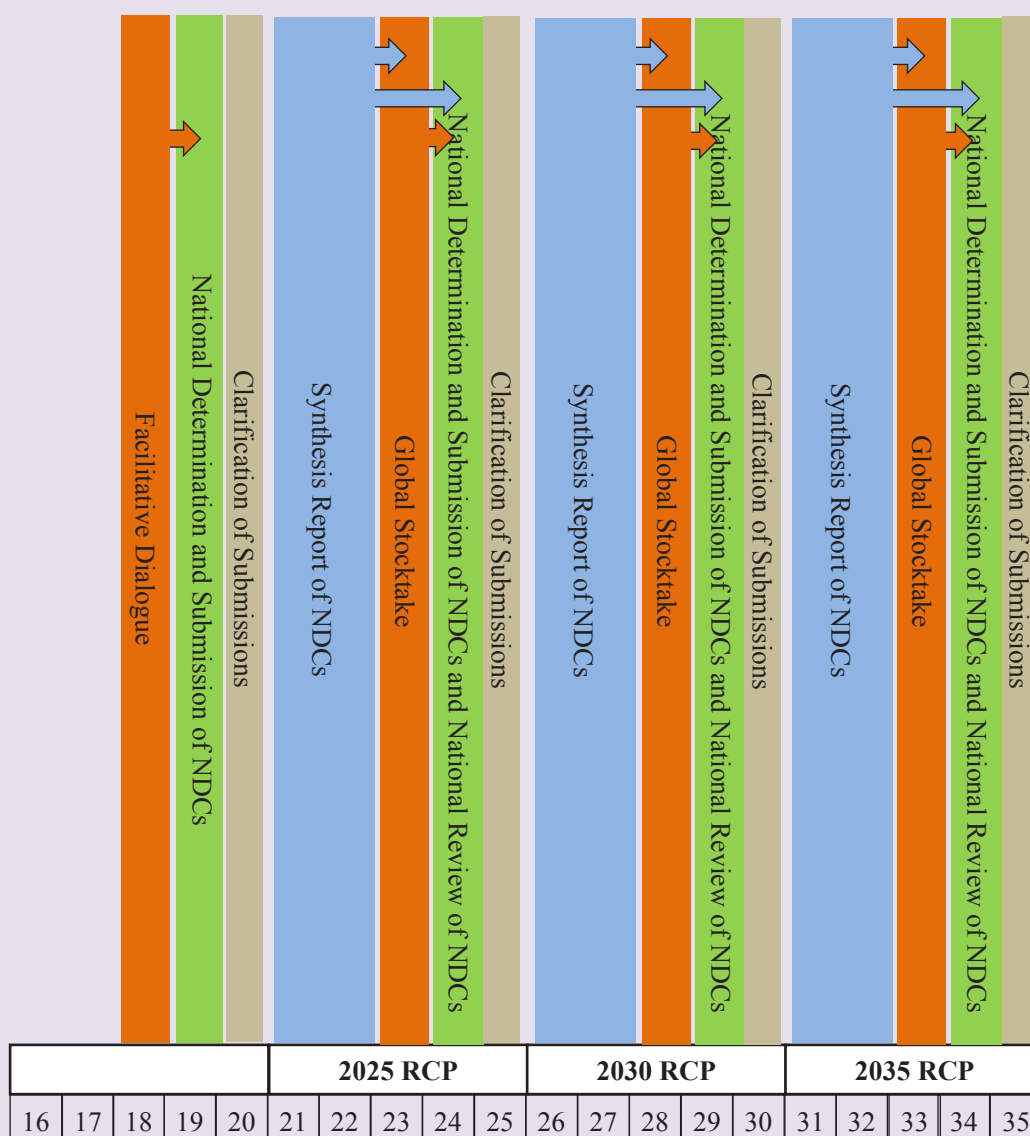
Review Cycles

Clarity of Contributions

According to §25, Parties are to submit their NDCs “*at least 9 to 12 months in advance of the relevant session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement [CMA] with a view to facilitating the clarity, transparency and understanding of these contributions, including through a synthesis report prepared by the secretariat*”. While the paragraph does not explain which session is meant to be “relevant” and for what, the context suggests the following interpretation: communication or updating of NDCs are to be done at the CMA session in the final year of the RCP, i.e. in 2020, 2025, 2030, 2035, and so on. The purpose of §25 under this interpretation is to give Parties and stakeholders the chance to seek clarification and feedback before the NDCs are actually communicated or updated.

This policy brief uses this interpretation and, to simplify matters for illustrative reasons, will assume that the submission is to be made **by the end of the fourth year of the RCP**, i.e. by the end of 2024, 2029, 2034, and so on.

Figure 2. The Paris Review Cycles



Synthesis Reports

What is the purpose of the synthesis reports referred to in §25, and when are they to be prepared? While not explicitly contained in the Outcome language, it would seem that their purpose is essentially the same as that of the global stocktake: *to inform Parties in **updating and enhancing ... their actions and support*** (Article 14.3). Their purpose, therefore, is *inter alia*, to inform Parties in the formulation and review of future NDCs. As indicated by the blue arrows in Figure 2, this could happen directly or through the global stocktake.

Global Stocktake

The global stocktake (“Stocktake”) defined in Article 14 is intended to take stock **of the implementation** of the Agreement **to assess the collective progress** towards achieving the purpose of the Agreement and its long-term goals, in a comprehensive and facilitative manner, considering **mitigation, adaptation, and the means**

of implementation and support, and in the light of equity and the best available science. The outcome of the Stocktake is meant to inform Parties in **updating and enhancing their actions and support**.

The timing of the Stocktake is crystal clear: it will take place in 2023, and periodically every five years thereafter (with a 2018 “prequel” Facilitative Dialogue). What is not so clear, as yet, is what exactly the Stocktake is meant to take stock of.

The remit of the Stocktake goes beyond mitigation, but for the purposes of this brief the key issue is: how does it deal with mitigation in general, and NDCs in particular? This is not self-evident in the Paris Outcome. However, there are elements in it that provide some clues.

§99 is of particular importance in this context, as it indicates the sort of information sources that are to be used in the Stocktake. Sub-paragraph (a)(i), for example, refers to information on “[t]he overall effect of the nationally determined contributions communicated by Parties”. It stands to reason that such information could be used for an analysis of the overall effect of future NDCs based, *inter alia*, on the preceding Synthesis Report of these communicated and updated future NDCs by the Secretariat, and information provided under Article 13.7, which stipulates that each Party is to provide:

- a. a national inventory report of anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases, prepared using good practice methodologies accepted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and agreed upon by the CMA; and
- b. information necessary to track progress made in implementing and achieving its NDC under Article 4.

According to §90, both types of reports are intended to be at least biennial (except in the case of least developed countries and small island developing States, where they are discretionary). Assuming that the information thus reported will feed into the Stocktake, it stands to reason that from 2028, the Stocktake will be able to consider implemented NDCs – the 2025 NDCs communicated by §23-Parties – and the “mid-term” implementation status of the 2030 NDCs communicated by §24-Parties.

3. AMBITION MECHANISM

According to Article 4.11, a Party “*may at any time adjust its existing nationally determined contribution with a view to enhancing its level of ambition*”. This by itself does not constitute an ambition mechanism. To qualify as an ambition mechanism, the communication/update cycles must involve **regular** updating, and it can reasonably be argued that it must involve not only a regular updating of all communicated NDCs, but of NDCs pertaining to the same year.

The point of an ambition mechanism is to give stakeholders the chance to convince themselves and others that they need to ratchet-up the ambition of their communicated NDCs in order to collectively meet the demands of science. For this, the NDCs in question need to be commensurate – it must be possible to aggregate them to assess collective ambition, and then to compare the aggregate result with what science tells us is needed to meet the objectives of the Agreement. The only practical way of carrying out such an aggregation is with figures pertaining to the same year. It is easier to describe and hence judge the collective ambition of NDCs of two or more Parties if they pertain to the same year, than if they do not.

It also stands to reason that the effect on overall ambition increases with the number of Parties involved in the updating exercise. Ideally, an ambition mechanism should therefore involve a simultaneous updating of all NDCs of the same year at some point after they have been communicated (and before they are implemented).

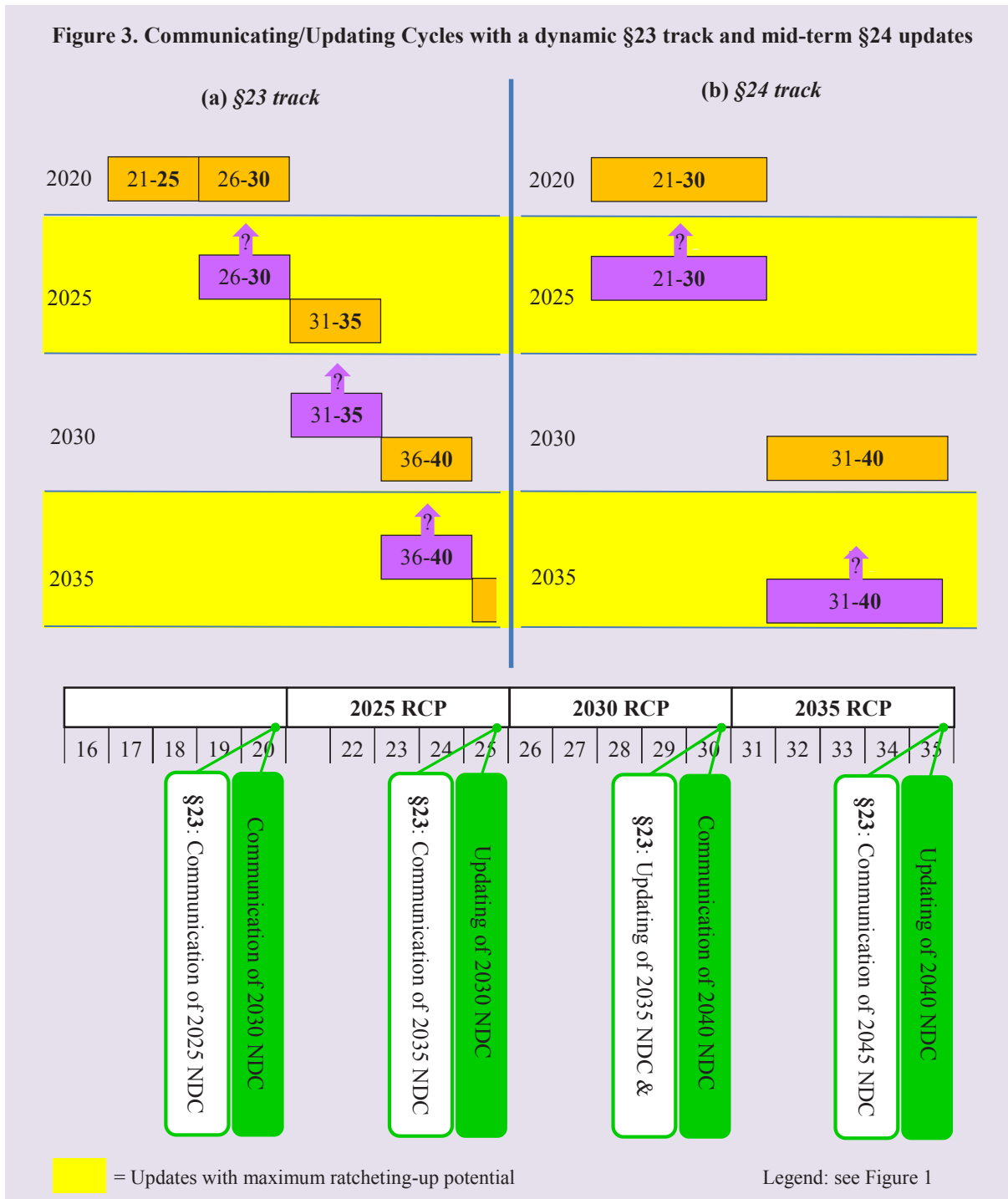
In sum, for an operationalization of the Paris Contribution Framework to include an Ambition Mechanism, it must:

[A.1] involve **regular** updates of **all** communicated NDCs.

The ratcheting-up potential of such an Ambition Mechanism can be increased by:

[A.2] increasing the number of Parties that are updating NDCs at the same time;

[A.3] focussing on NDCs pertaining to the same year during these synchronised updates.



As there is no regular §23 updating envisaged in the Communicating/Updating Cycles illustrated in Figure 1, the Paris Contribution Framework does not have an Ambition Mechanism in this sense. However, this can be easily remedied, by requesting §23 Parties to update their NDCs in the manner of the Dynamic Contribution Cycle (see Figure 3.a). There would then be regular updates with maximum scope and focus (2025, 2035, etc.) in those instances, highlighted in yellow, when **all** Parties update **the same** NDCs (2030, 2040, etc.).

The sequencing will be critical here. To demonstrate how things could easily go wrong in the absence of the right sequencing, consider the §24 Communicating/Updating Cycle illustrated in Figure 4.b, where the updating happens not mid-term, but at the end of the preceding term. In this case, there will be coherence **within** the two tracks, but no coherence **between** them. Either only one track updates (2020, 2025, 2035 etc.), or when both tracks update at the same time (2030), they update NDCs pertaining to different years.

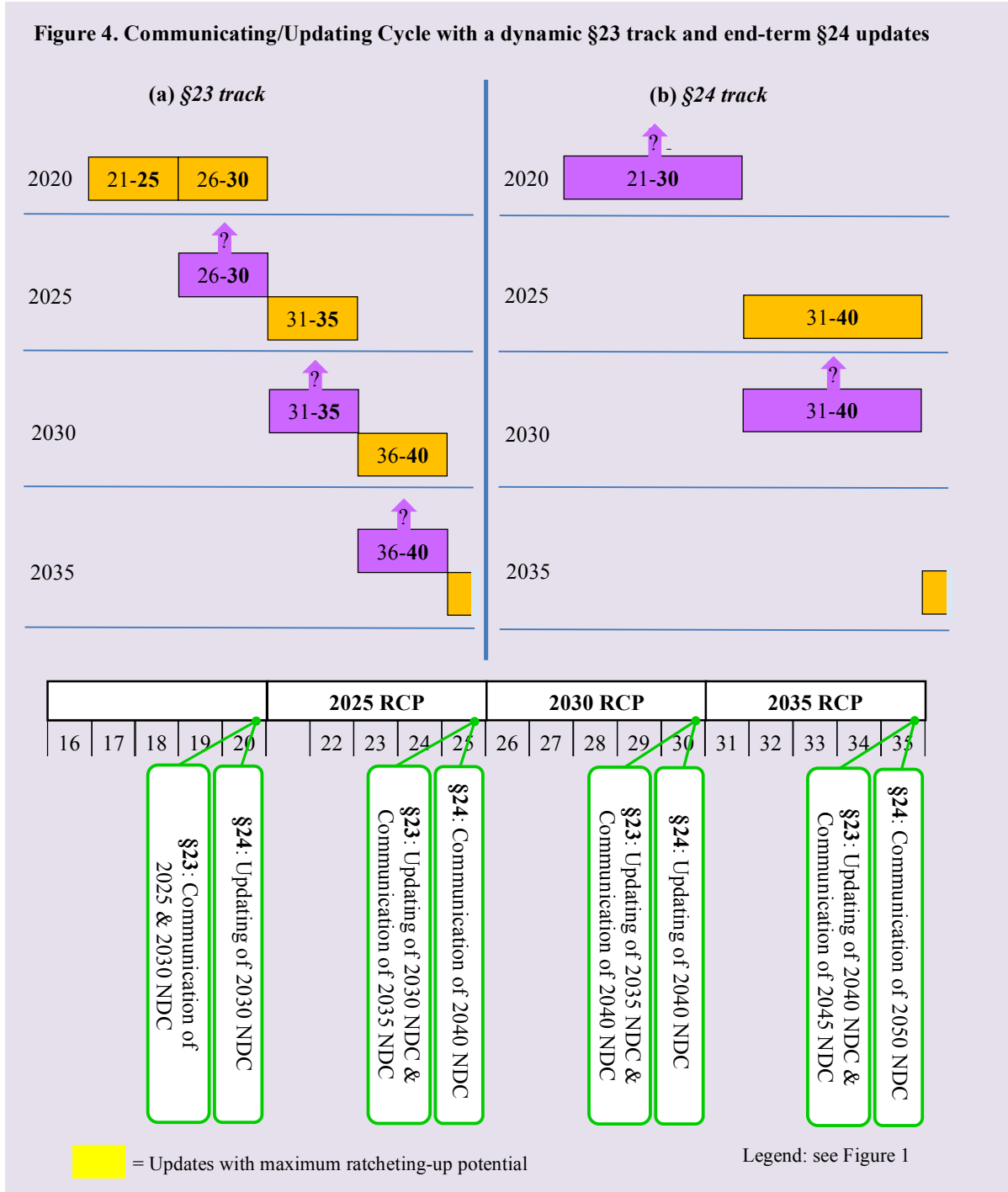


Figure 5 illustrates the effect of this incoherence on the relevant review cycles. It may not be impossible, but it is certainly not easy to see how, under these circumstances, the Synthesis Reports and Stocktakes could “*inform Parties in updating and enhancing, in a nationally determined manner, their actions and support*” (Article 14.3). For instance, the post-2025 Synthesis Report will synthesise NDCs for three differing periods: 2040, for the §24 track; and 2035 and 2030 (updated) for the §23 track. With such varying time periods, even if it were possible to form a judgment about the adequacy of overall mitigation effort of these diverse NDCs, it is not clear how any additional effort – if required – will be divided up. In particular, how will the additional effort be divided up between the three NDC time periods (2030, 2035, and 2040)? This situation will not help to maximise the ratcheting-up potential of the Paris Contribution Framework.

Fortunately, this is not the only option. There is, for one, the ‘mid-term’ option illustrated in Figure 3, which can be even further enhanced with respect to coherence by taking on board further elements of the DCC.

4.A DYNAMIC AMBITION MECHANISM

As described in the introduction, the DCC, proposed by senior negotiators from developing countries, allows time and opportunity for initial communications to be updated on the basis of reviews, in order to foster ambition. It does so, to quote the [original proposal](#), “*in a manner that avoids certain key political constraints and controversies, including:*”

- *what might be called “political lock-in”, given by some governments finding it very difficult to change figures, particularly near-term ones, once they have been published for inscription. In many countries, such figures will have been approved at the highest political and/or parliamentary levels, which renders revisions almost impossible; and*
- *differences in the views on how long a cycle should be in order to give (i) sufficient policy stability to global climate governance, (ii) predictability for the private sector, and (iii) assurance on enabling contributions for others, whilst at the same time not locking-in low ambition for longer periods of time, and allowing Parties to take into consideration the latest available scientific knowledge.”*

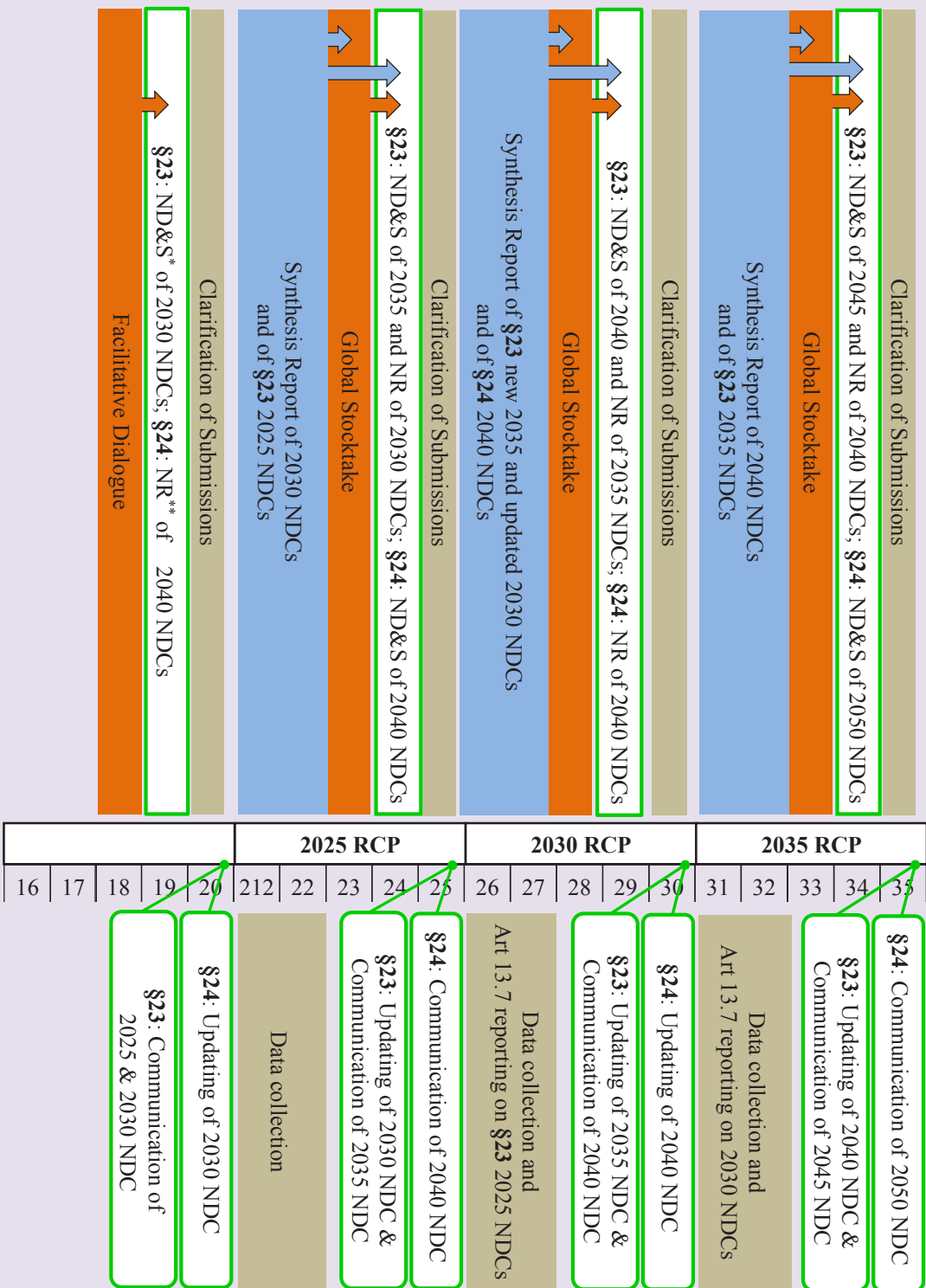
The DCC also provides **shorter-term predictability** through the inscription of the subsequent five-year term contributions, with a **medium-term indication** of how the national contributions are going to evolve (thus avoiding surprises every five years), together with a mechanism to **ratchet-up ambition**.

In principle, the Paris Contribution Framework contains all the main elements of the DCC. As illustrated above, the provisions for communicating and updating NDCs, in particular, incorporate two of the key ideas of the DCC: the communication of shorter-term and medium-term contributions, and the option of synchronized updating. They can be operationalised with different ratcheting-up potential. The question now is whether it is possible for the Paris Contribution Framework to harness the full ambition potential of the DCC?

The answer is that this can be done, and that too without the need to ‘harmonise’ time-frames. All the Conference of Parties would need to do is to **urge/request all Parties, in 2025, to communicate a 2035 NDC and to update their 2030 NDC, and do so every five years thereafter**.

The idea of §24-Parties submitting NDCs every five years may seem puzzling, but it is perfectly possible. For instance, take the case of the EU. Based on its [INDC submission](#), it stands to reason that the EU will adopt a §24-track 10-year time frame for its NDCs, beginning with a 2030 NDC of a 40 per cent reduction from a 1990 baseline, between 2021 and 2030. This means that *average annual EU emissions over that time frame* will not exceed 60 per cent of 1990 emissions. It would be perfectly possible for the EU in 2025 to communicate a 2035

Figure 5. Ambition Mechanism with a dynamic §23 track and end-term §24 updates



* ND&S = National Determination and Submission
 ** NR = National Review

Legend: see Figure 1

NDC with a ten-year time frame, with a reduction of, say, 60 per cent below the 1990 baseline, in the sense of average annual emissions between 2026 and 2035 not exceeding 40 per cent of 1990 levels.

In other words, it is possible to make mid-term communications of new NDCs under a ten-year time frame track because there is no reason, in principle, why time frames cannot overlap, as illustrated in Figure 6 (b).

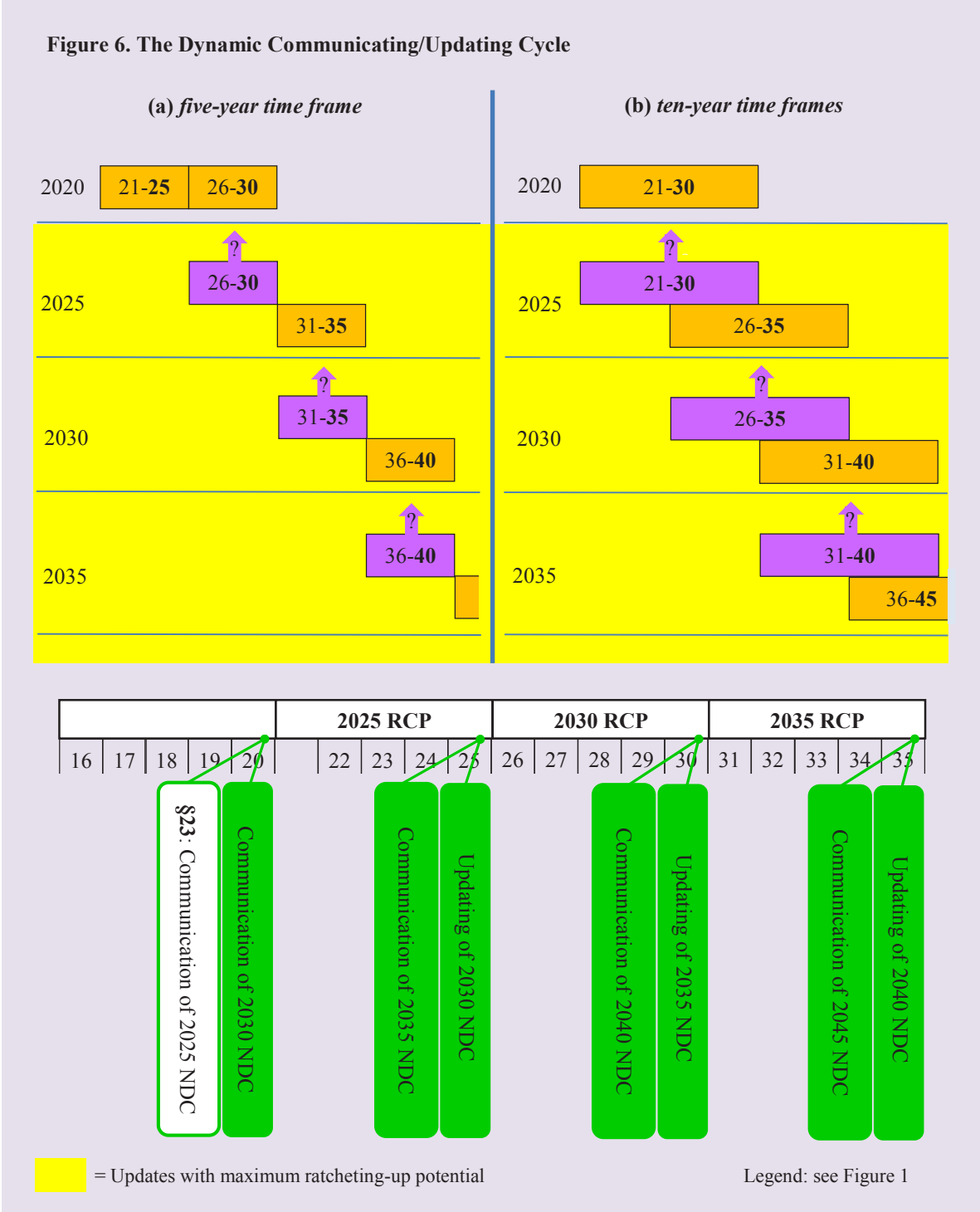
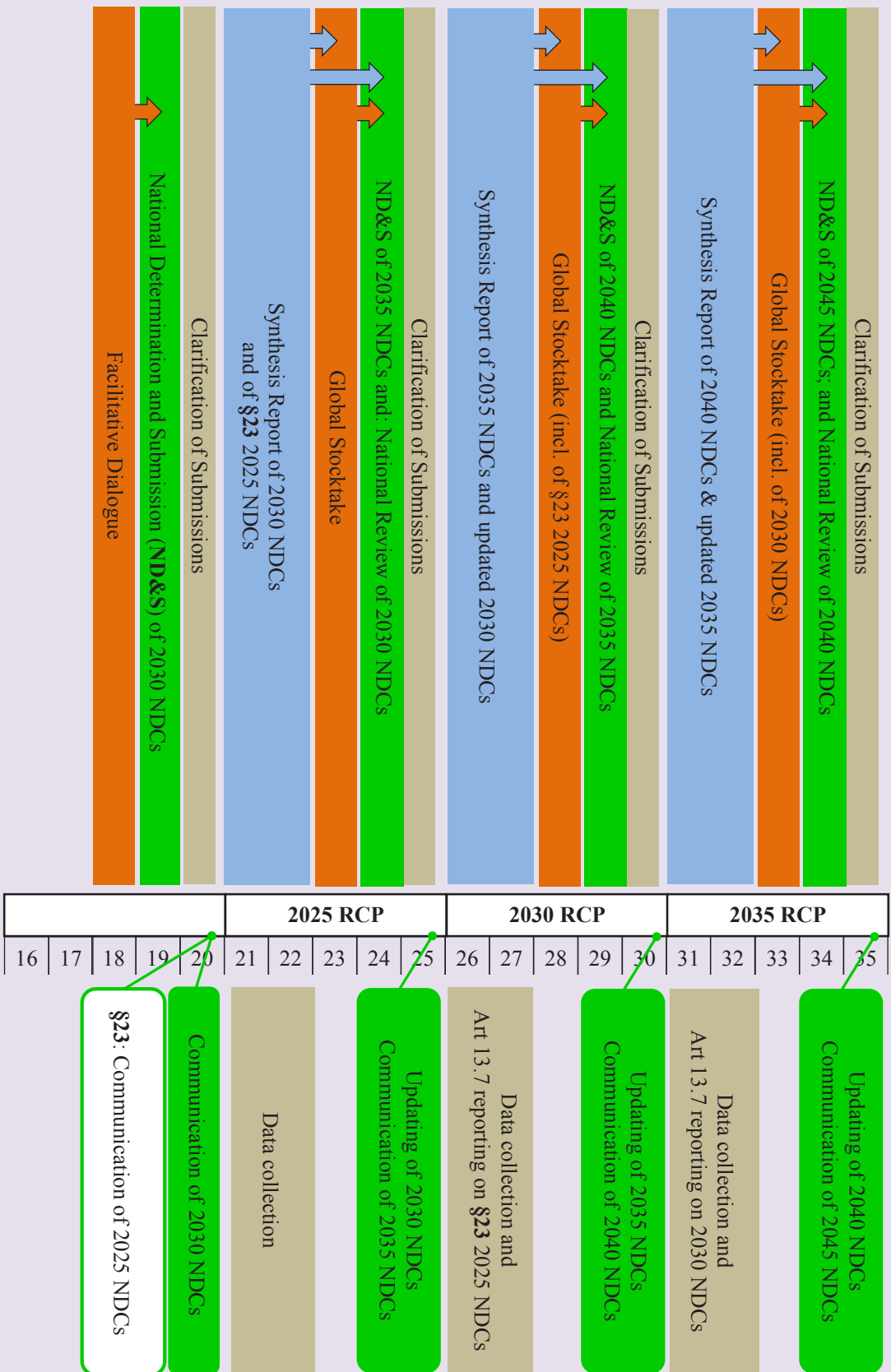


Figure 7. Dynamic Ambition Mechanism



It is important to highlight that this is possible without harmonizing the different time frames that were the reason for the two-track formulation in the first place. In particular, in 2025, it would be perfectly possible for Parties with a ten-year time frame preference to communicate a 2035 NDC with a 2026 to 2035 time frame. Of course it would probably simplify things if all Parties put forward NDCs with a 2031-2035 time frame, but that is not a prerequisite to harmonising the two tracks. The “Dynamic Ambition Mechanism”, thus defined (see Figure 7), will be able to harness all the advantages of the DCC proposal, without prejudice with regards to the length of time frames.

5. APPENDIX I: RELEVANT EXCERPTS FROM THE PARIS OUTCOME

The Paris Agreement

Article 4.9 (Communication Cycle)

Each Party shall communicate a nationally determined contribution every five years in accordance with decision 1/CP.21 and any relevant decisions of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement and be informed by the outcomes of the global stocktake referred to in Article 14.

Article 4.10 (Harmonization of time frames)

The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall consider common time frames for nationally determined contributions at its first session.

Article 4.11 (Ratcheting of NDCs)

A Party may at any time adjust its existing nationally determined contribution with a view to enhancing its level of ambition, in accordance with guidance adopted by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.

Article 13.7 (Inventory and other reporting)

Each Party shall regularly provide the following information:

- (a) A national inventory report of anthropogenic emissions by sources and removals by sinks of greenhouse gases, prepared using good practice methodologies accepted by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and agreed upon by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement;
- (b) Information necessary to track progress made in implementing and achieving its nationally determined contribution under Article 4.

Article 14 (Global stocktake)

1. The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall periodically take stock of the implementation of this Agreement to assess the collective progress towards achieving the purpose of this Agreement and its long-term goals (referred to as the ‘global stocktake’). It

shall do so in a comprehensive and facilitative manner, considering mitigation, adaptation and the means of implementation and support, and in the light of equity and the best available science.

2. The Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement shall undertake its first global stocktake in 2023 and every five years thereafter unless otherwise decided by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.

3. The outcome of the global stocktake shall inform Parties in updating and enhancing, in a nationally determined manner, their actions and support in accordance with the relevant provisions of this Agreement, as well as in enhancing international cooperation for climate action.

Article 15 (Compliance mechanism)

1. A mechanism to facilitate implementation of and promote compliance with the provisions of this Agreement is hereby established.

2. The mechanism referred to in paragraph 1 of this Article shall consist of a committee that shall be expert-based and facilitative in nature and function in a manner that is transparent, non-adversarial and non-punitive. The committee shall pay particular attention to the respective national capabilities and circumstances of Parties.

3. The committee shall operate under the modalities and procedures adopted by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement at its first session and report annually to the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.

The Decision

II. Intended Nationally Determined Contributions

20. Decides to convene a facilitative dialogue among Parties in 2018 to take stock of the collective efforts of Parties in relation to progress towards the long-term goal referred to in Article 4, paragraph 1, of the Agreement and to inform the preparation of nationally determined contributions pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 8, of the Agreement;

III. Decisions to give effect to the Agreement

Mitigation

22. Invites Parties to communicate their first nationally determined contribution no later than when the Party submits its respective instrument of ratification, accession, or approval of the Paris Agreement. If a Party has communicated an intended nationally determined contribution prior to joining the Agreement, that Party shall be considered to have satisfied this provision unless that Party decides otherwise;

23. Urges those Parties whose intended nationally determined contribution pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 contains a time frame up to 2025 to communicate by 2020 a new nationally determined contribution and to do so every five years thereafter pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 9, of the Agreement;

24. Requests those Parties whose intended nationally determined contribution pursuant to decision 1/CP.20 contains a time frame up to 2030 to communicate or update by 2020 these contributions and to do so every five years thereafter pursuant to Article 4, paragraph 9, of the Agreement;

25. Decides that Parties shall submit to the secretariat their nationally determined contributions referred to in Article 4 of the Agreement at least 9 to 12 months in advance of the relevant meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement with a view to facilitating the clarity, transparency and understanding of these contributions, including through a synthesis report prepared by the secretariat;

27. Agrees that the information to be provided by Parties communicating their nationally determined contributions, ... may include, as appropriate, inter alia, quantifiable information on the reference point (including, as appropriate, a base year), time frames and/or periods for implementation, scope and coverage, ...

Transparency of Action and Support

91. Also decides that all Parties, except for the least developed country Parties and small island developing States, shall submit the information referred to in Article 13, paragraphs 7, 8, 9 and 10, as appropriate, no less frequently than on a biennial basis, and that the least developed country Parties and small island developing States may submit this information at their discretion;

Global Stocktake

100. Requests the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement to identify the sources of input for the global stocktake referred to in Article 14 of the Agreement and to report to the Conference of the Parties, with a view to the Conference of the Parties making a recommendation to the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement for consideration and adoption at its first session, including, but not limited to:

(a) Information on:

(i) The overall effect of the nationally determined contributions communicated by Parties;

(ii) The state of adaptation efforts, support, experiences and priorities from the communications referred to in Article 7, paragraphs 10 and 11, of the Agreement, and reports referred to in Article 13, paragraph 7, of the Agreement;

(iii) The mobilization and provision of support;

(b) The latest reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change;

(c) Reports of the subsidiary bodies;

101. Also requests the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice to provide advice on how the assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change can inform the global stocktake of the implementation of the Agreement pursuant to its Article 14 of the Agreement and to report on this matter to the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement at its second session;

102. Further requests the Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement to develop modalities for the global stocktake referred to in Article 14 of the Agreement and to report to the Conference of the Parties, with

a view to making a recommendation to the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement for consideration and adoption at its first session;

Facilitating Implementation and Compliance

103. Decides that the committee referred to in Article 15, paragraph 2, of the Agreement shall consist of 12 members with recognized competence in relevant scientific, technical, socio-economic or legal fields, to be elected by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement on the basis of equitable geographical representation, with two members each from the five regional groups of the United Nations and one member each from the small island developing States and the least developed countries, while taking into account the goal of gender balance [...].

Notes

1. See also ['Maillot Jaune' for the Dynamic Contribution Cycle](#).
2. Note that the two would not necessarily need to be identical. For example, it is not unthinkable that an NDC could be defined in terms of emissions over a single-year time frame (a "point year target") with implementation starting before that year

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