

2026 ecbi New Delhi Seminar



Photo of Jama Masjid by Anju Sharma

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Reimagining a Fit for Purpose Climate Regime

Report of the 2026 ecbi New Delhi Seminar

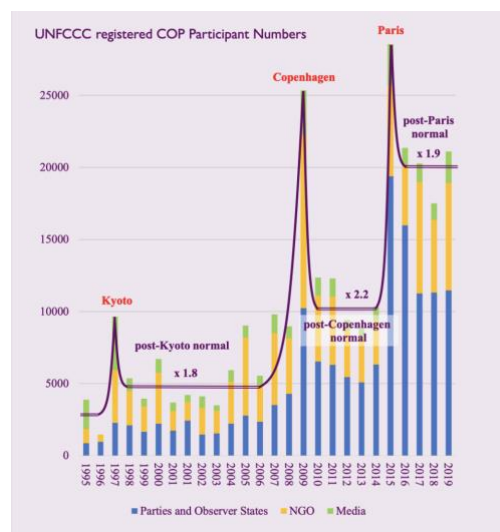
The 2026 ecbi New Delhi Seminar, which took place on 3 March at the India International Centre, focused on discussions on how to ensure the global climate regime remains fit for purpose.

Quo Vadis COP? The 2024 Update

At the meeting, Benito Müller presented the latest update of the ecbi paper *Quo Vadis COP? Future Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings Under the UNFCCC – Settled and Fit for Purpose*, which examines the growing challenges facing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) process. The 2024 update focuses primarily on the implications of the increasingly large and complex COP meetings—often referred to as “mega-COPs”. His presentation highlighted the structural problems created by the scale of recent COPs and proposed institutional reforms aimed at improving the efficiency, inclusiveness, and credibility of the multilateral climate process.

Müller reported that the 2021 edition of *Quo Vadis COP?* showed how the number of COP participants doubled with each ‘treaty COP’ (Kyoto, Copenhagen, and Paris) and then became the ‘new normal’ thereafter. Before Kyoto, the average number of participants was 2,700. At COP3 (Kyoto), the figure more than tripled to 9,600. Post-Kyoto, this settled down to a new average (from COP4 to COP12) of 4,800. At Copenhagen (COP15), the figure rose to 25,000 and settled down to a new normal of 10,600 (average of COP16 to COP20). After Copenhagen, the UNFCCC Secretariat began capping the number of NGO and media participants. Even so, 28,000 participants attended the Blue Zone at COP21 in Paris. After Paris, the figure settled to another ‘new normal’ of 20,000 (average of COP22 to COP25), again twice as many as at the previous level (see Figure 1).

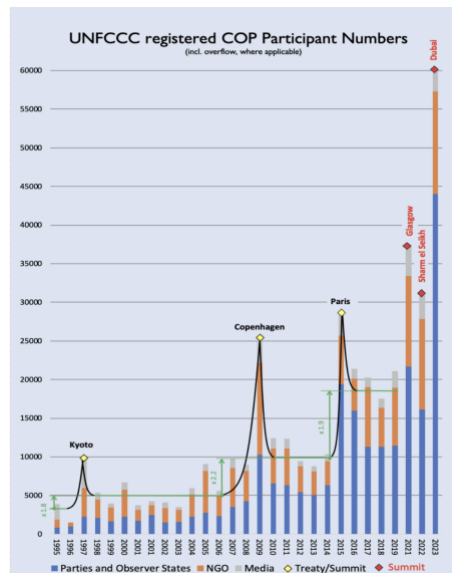
Figure 1: COP participants doubled with each “treaty COP”



The 2024 update explained that that the UK was the first to host a Summit in Glasgow (2021) at a non-treaty COP. Since then, Summits have become a ‘new normal’ for COPs,

without an expectation of (or need for) a treaty outcome. This has further driven up the number of registered participants (see Figure 2). The impact of this growth in participant numbers is greater than the number of participants attending the Governing Body Sessions (‘negotiations’). It impinges on the integrity and credibility of COPs that do not deliver the implementation of treaties already agreed.

Figure 2: Summits, a new normal, have further driven up participant numbers



Update Concerns Arising from the Current Scale and Structure of COP Meetings

Müller further noted that the 2024 update identifies three major concerns arising from the current scale and structure of COP meetings: equity and inclusiveness concerns; reduced effectiveness of negotiations; and reputational risk for the multilateral climate process.

Equity and Inclusiveness Concerns: Müller said the growing size and cost of COP meetings raise significant equity issues. Many climate-vulnerable countries lack the financial and administrative capacity to host such large-scale events. As a result, these countries—whose voices are particularly important in global climate governance—are increasingly unable to preside over or host COP meetings. Even developed countries with greater institutional and financial capacity are increasingly showing reluctance to host these events due to the high logistical and financial demands. This trend risks undermining the inclusiveness and representativeness of the multilateral climate process.

Reduced Effectiveness of Negotiations: A second concern relates to the functioning of negotiations. Smaller diplomatic gatherings often benefit from informal interactions and spontaneous encounters between participants, which can facilitate consensus building. However, the sheer size of mega-COPs makes such interactions more difficult. The large number of participants and parallel events creates a fragmented environment where negotiators may find it harder to engage in informal dialogue that could help resolve complex issues.

Reputational Risks for the Multilateral Climate Process: Müller noted that mega-COPs also pose reputational risks for the international climate negotiations under the UNFCCC.

Large-scale public attention and media coverage often inflate expectations regarding COP outcomes. In many cases, however, the current phase of the climate regime, which is focused on implementation rather than treaty making, is not designed to deliver dramatic new agreements.

This mismatch between expectations and outcomes can create the perception that COPs are too big and act as ceremonial gatherings rather than effective decision-making fora. Such perceptions overshadow important but less visible achievements, including progress under the Paris Agreement, the Global Stocktake, enhanced transparency frameworks, and the submission of new Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

Arising Disaggregating the “COP Mela”

To address these challenges, the updated paper proposes disaggregating what Müller described as the current “COP mela”—a large, combined gathering consisting of several distinct activities.

The analysis identifies three main components currently taking place simultaneously at COP meetings:

- Formal negotiations, including sessions of the governing and subsidiary bodies.
- Political summit meetings, involving heads of state and ministers.
- Trade fairs and climate expos, showcasing technologies, partnerships, and initiatives.

While all three elements play important roles in the climate governance and action ecosystem, the paper argues that there is no inherent reason for them to occur in the same place at the same time. Their co-location is largely the result of administrative convenience and unplanned evolution rather than deliberate institutional design.

The 2024 update proposes a spatio-temporal decentralization of COP activities, separating them into distinct events with different purposes and, thus, making COPs more democratic, inclusive, and action focused.

COP Negotiation Sessions: Formal negotiation sessions—covering the meetings of the governing and subsidiary bodies—would be held in Bonn, where the UNFCCC Secretariat is headquartered. These meetings could take place at the World Conference Centre Bonn, which has a capacity of approximately 5,000 participants. The sessions would follow the model of the mid-year meetings of the Subsidiary Bodies and focus exclusively on negotiations, without a ministerial high-level segment.

COP Presidency Climate Summits: High-level political summits convened by the COP Presidency could take place separately when political leadership is required. These summits could be hosted either within the region of the COP Presidency, alongside climate expos, or at the United Nations Office at Geneva. In years when new NDCs are expected, the summit could be held approximately nine months before the COP session, allowing governments to present their updated commitments at a politically meaningful moment.

COP Presidency Climate Expos: Climate expos—focusing on technology, partnerships, and initiatives—could be organized in the UN region holding the rotating COP Presidency. These expos would not necessarily need to be hosted in the country that holds the presidency itself but could take place elsewhere within the region.

Müller’s presentation concluded that the current model of large, multi-purpose COP gatherings may no longer be sustainable. By separating negotiations, political summits, and climate expos into distinct events, the UNFCCC process could become more manageable, inclusive, and effective. Such decentralization could:

- reduce financial and logistical burdens on host countries;
- improve the functioning of negotiations; and
- better align public expectations with the actual role of international climate negotiations.

The proposal aims to preserve the strengths of the COP process while adapting its institutional structure to the realities of an implementation-focused climate regime under the Paris Agreement.

Repurposing the Climate Sessions

Anju Sharma, ecbi, presented a draft paper on “Repurposing the Climate Sessions”, authored by Stefan Ruchti, former Swiss negotiator, and Paul Watkinson, former EU negotiator.

The paper examines the evolving role of the multilateral climate negotiations under the UNFCCC and the need to adapt the process to the current phase of climate governance. It notes that the UNFCCC process was created in a different political and institutional era. In its early decades, the primary objective of the international climate negotiations was to establish global agreements and frameworks. In this respect, the process achieved several major milestones, including adoption of the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement. These agreements established the core architecture of the global climate regime.

However, progress on several critical aspects of climate action remains insufficient, including:

- mitigation, particularly the scale and speed of emission reductions required to meet global temperature goals;
- adaptation, including the development and implementation of strategies to manage climate risks;
- loss and damage, addressing the impacts of climate change that exceed adaptation capacities;
- climate finance, including the mobilization and delivery of financial resources to developing countries; and
- transparency of the process and implementation of agreed decisions, including accountability and reporting.

While these issues continue to be negotiated extensively within the UNFCCC framework, negotiations alone have not always translated into meaningful implementation progress.

Focus on Negotiations, not Implementation

The current phase of climate governance requires greater emphasis on practical implementation and cooperation. Negotiations remain important in certain contexts, but the paper notes that they are not always the most effective tool for advancing progress toward global and national climate goals. Nevertheless, negotiations continue to be the dominant method of work for the majority of agenda items under the UNFCCC. Nearly all issues are treated as negotiation topics, even when negotiations may not be the most appropriate mechanism for advancing action. For instance, the Mitigation Work Programme (MWP) does not require further negotiations, but has created opportunities for countries to exchange experiences and learn from one another regarding mitigation strategies. Such exchanges have proven valuable and can generate practical insights for implementation. However, discussions under the MWP are often dominated by negotiators who may not have direct expertise in implementation. They frequently assume that all work conducted during climate sessions must culminate in negotiated decisions.

Even initiatives intended to accelerate implementation tend to remain embedded within negotiation-focused forums. For example, Belém was meant to be an “implementation COP”, but the focus remained on negotiations. One possible reason is that COPs are attended primarily by negotiators rather than implementation experts. This dynamic reflects the composition of many national delegations. Moreover, Heads of Delegation typically concentrate on negotiation strategies, while implementation-related discussions are often delegated to more junior negotiators who may have limited influence within the negotiation process.

Increasing Institutional Complexity

Another issue considered in the paper is the growing complexity of the UNFCCC institutional system. Over time, the number of mandates, workstreams, and constituted bodies has steadily expanded. This has led to an increasingly crowded agenda, fragmented discussions across multiple forums, and rising demands on national delegations. For many smaller countries, especially those with limited diplomatic resources, keeping track of multiple parallel negotiations and technical processes places significant strain on their capacity to participate effectively.

Taken together, these challenges have contributed to the perception that the UNFCCC process is becoming increasingly inefficient and difficult to manage. The expanding agenda, negotiation-heavy structure, and limited focus on implementation risk undermining the effectiveness of the multilateral climate regime. The process is even beginning to be viewed as ineffective or losing relevance in delivering real-world climate action.

Proposals for the Repurposing

While stressing that negotiations remain an essential tool within the UNFCCC framework, the paper argues that they should not be the default working method for addressing every agenda item. The objective of repurposing climate sessions is, therefore, threefold:

- Maintain the ability to deliver negotiated outcomes where they are necessary, but in a more effective and focused manner.
- Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the climate negotiation process.
- Strengthen implementation, including through work modalities that support experience sharing, cooperation, and stronger integration of scientific knowledge.

Repurposing the climate sessions could also help reaffirm the central role of the United Nations in global climate action by making the process more responsive and effective.

The paper makes the following specific proposals:

Reorganising, streamlining, and simplifying agendas, by merging and tidying items and by exploring a multiannual work plan so not all the items have to be taken up at every session. While this process will allow more time for individual items, it could encounter political obstacles if some countries resist removing or restructuring existing agenda items. Best (non-confrontational) practices will also need to be developed in parallel, for adopting agendas in a more constructive manner, including early submission of proposed items and avoiding duplication across agenda items. Possible steps include:

- Conducting a comprehensive review of mandated events, constituted bodies, and work programmes within the UNFCCC framework.
- Removing outdated or “legacy” agenda items that no longer serve a meaningful purpose.
- Merging related agenda items into broader categories to allow for more flexible and efficient work.
- Introducing a multi-year programme of work, rather than addressing every agenda item during each session. This approach could reduce time pressure and enable deeper engagement on specific issues.

Dedicating more time to implementation, by considering other modalities besides negotiations, and using formats that favour the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and best practices. Lessons could be drawn from experience with existing formats such as NDC country dialogues, the Talanoa dialogue, Structured Expert Dialogue (Periodic Review), Technical Dialogue (GST), and Technical Expert Dialogues on Climate Finance. To enhance the implementation focus of climate sessions, the presentation suggested broadening the composition of national delegations. Possible measures could include:

- Incorporating national implementation experts within delegations.
- Engaging ministers responsible for sectors, such as energy, finance, and trade, to address practical challenges related to delivering climate action.
- Appointing a Head of Implementation within national delegations to complement the traditional Head of Delegation responsible for negotiations.
- Making the enhanced transparency framework under the Paris Agreement more interactive to facilitate mutual learning and identify implementation barriers.
- Strengthening the science-policy interface, drawing on both natural and social sciences to inform decision-making and implementation strategies.

Discussions should also be held to address systemic barriers to implementation, such as:

- the high cost of capital for climate investments.
- unsustainable debt burdens in developing countries; and
- mechanisms to translate NDCs into investable plans.

Making better use of intersessional meetings, including by: creating better synergies between climate weeks and pre-sessional work with the UNFCCC Global Climate Action Agenda; and strengthening regional climate weeks, which provide opportunities to involve a broader range of implementation actors. Improved coordination with the broader global climate action agenda could also help align negotiation processes with real-world implementation initiatives. At the same time, the paper notes that the pre-sessional week—a space for informal consultations before formal negotiations—has become increasingly overloaded and may require restructuring.

While acknowledging that an excessive focus on procedural reforms risks diverting attention toward lengthy debates about process rather than substantive discussions about climate action, the paper also cautions that reform efforts must not focus exclusively on procedural restructuring. Maintaining a strong connection between climate negotiations and the latest scientific evidence—such as findings from climate monitoring networks and research institutions—remains essential for strengthening climate action.

The presentation concluded by inviting participants to reflect on several key questions:

- Is there broad agreement on the need to repurpose climate sessions toward stronger implementation?
- What potential downsides or risks should be considered?
- What advantages might such reforms bring for the effectiveness of the UNFCCC process?
- Is implement these changes possible without triggering prolonged agenda negotiations that consume valuable time?
- How can the participation of national implementation experts in climate sessions be strengthened?

Rethinking the UNFCCC Process and the Role of the COP

Ovais Sarmad, former UNFCCC Deputy Executive Secretary and Independent Advisor on Sustainability, presented on reforming the UNFCCC process, particularly climate weeks and intersessional meetings. He noted that the current discussion on reforming the UNFCCC process is both timely and necessary. While there is growing recognition that reform is needed, uncertainty remains regarding what concrete changes might emerge or how they could be implemented. The UN is under financial and geopolitical strain, and public perceptions of the UN in general and COPs in particular have taken a hit. Thus, reforming the process before it becomes unsustainable under its own weight is important.

Sarmad noted that countries have explored ways to expand climate governance beyond annual COP meetings since the post-Kyoto Protocol era. The objective was to distribute climate engagement across regions and countries and broaden participation beyond governments to include civil society, the private sector, NGOs, and foundations.

One outcome of these discussions was the creation of regional Climate Weeks, introduced in the early 2010s as a bridge between annual COP meetings and year-round climate action. The Climate Weeks were intended to: decentralize climate discussions; strengthen regional engagement; and connect national initiatives with global negotiations. Subsequently, Climate Weeks were organized across Africa, Latin America, the Asia-Pacific region, and the Middle East and North Africa.

Over time, multiple climate-related events emerged outside the formal UNFCCC structure, including New York Climate Week, launched alongside the UN General Assembly, and London Climate Action Week, initiated by policy organizations and think tanks. More recently, similar climate weeks have taken place across different countries and cities, including in India. As a result, climate events have proliferated rapidly—often without coordination.

While these Climate Weeks have helped bring climate discussions closer to national and regional stakeholders who could not easily participate in COP meetings, they are not part of the broader framework of accountability, finance, and justice. Without concrete follow-up, they risk becoming talk shops and platforms for greenwashing.

Within the UNFCCC process itself, the number of official Climate Weeks has decreased to two per year, one in the region hosting the upcoming COP and another hosted by a country that volunteers to organize it. For example, Climate Weeks are expected to take place in Addis Ababa and South Korea in 2026.

Sarmad noted that the concept behind Climate Weeks remains valuable because it helps decentralize and democratize climate engagement. However, the broader UNFCCC process has grown extremely complex. The COP system has effectively become a “Frankenstein” that is difficult to control, coordinate, or reform, and contains several major components:

- **Negotiations**, conducted by official delegates.
- **Country Pavilions** where national governments showcase climate initiatives and partnerships.
- **Climate Action Spaces (Green Zones)**, areas for civil society, private sector actors, NGOs, and advocacy groups.

These peripheral spaces create significant “noise” around the core negotiations. In theory, they help create an ecosystem where negotiators hear perspectives from outside stakeholders. In practice, however, the effectiveness of this interaction is questionable. Looking at the past decade, the COP process has not consistently delivered coherent, coordinated outcomes aligned with the scale of the climate challenge.

Sarmad indicated that COP meetings have also become extraordinarily large and expensive. Recent COPs have cost between USD 150 and 250 million to organize. Such high costs make it extremely difficult for smaller or developing countries to host them. The events themselves have become mega-conferences that are increasingly difficult to manage.

To create a clearer structure for climate governance and to reduce congestion at COPs, Sarmad suggested separating the major functions currently bundled into COP meetings:

- **Negotiations** would remain the core activity and continue under the UNFCCC.
- **Climate Action Platforms**, including activities in pavilions, green zones, and partnership announcements, could be moved to Climate Weeks and other global events.
- **Implementation reviews** could become a key focus of the system, which could then dedicate attention to tracking implementation of existing decisions, assessing progress, and identifying gaps instead of launching new negotiations every year.

However, Sarmad highlighted that reforming the system is easier to propose than to implement. The UNFCCC Secretariat cannot unilaterally impose reforms because it serves 197 Parties. Major procedural changes would require political leadership from COP Presidencies. Fortunately, the COP system now includes a “troika” structure consisting of the previous COP Presidency, the current Presidency, and the incoming Presidency. This trio could potentially champion reforms collectively.

Sarmad also noted strong incentives to maintain the current system. Each COP Presidency wants to leave a legacy—often through declarations or initiatives named after the host country. These announcements frequently occur outside the formal negotiation process but are highlighted in the final COP decision and through media coverage. As a result, presidencies often rely on side initiatives to demonstrate success, especially when negotiations stall.

Discussion

The discussion that followed these presentations highlighted both procedural inefficiencies and deeper political constraints. Participants noted declining enthusiasm from some governments, and said, while the COP formally decides outcomes, in practice the incoming Presidency has significant influence over agendas, formats, and initiatives. This creates flexibility but also reinforces inertia, as one-off practices quickly become entrenched traditions.

There was broad agreement on the need to separate core negotiations from peripheral activities. Participants said side events, summits, and initiatives—often used by presidencies to showcase “success”—can distract from negotiations, especially for smaller delegations with limited capacity. However, these parallel initiatives persist because they provide visible outcomes when formal negotiations stall.

Participants highlighted serious inefficiencies in the negotiation process and argued that structural mistrust between developed and developing countries underpins the slow progress. Disagreements over interpretation of the Paris Agreement, especially on finance and mitigation, lead to prolonged procedural battles and diluted outcomes. Negotiations often become circular, with countries focused on protecting existing commitments rather than creating new ones.

There was also criticism of hybrid formats like Technical Expert Dialogues, which are viewed as neither fully negotiated nor purely consultative, often resulting in unfocused discussions without clear mandates.

Several reform ideas emerged, including:

- Streamlining agendas and institutional structures to reduce duplication and inefficiency.
- Decoupling political announcements and initiatives from formal negotiations, possibly shifting them to summits or external platforms.
- Exploring a standing or continuous negotiation model inspired by other multilateral systems, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), to reduce pressure on annual COPs and enable more sustained progress. Under such a model, negotiations would occur continuously at a permanent location; diplomats and negotiators would be stationed there year-round; and major ministerial meetings would occur periodically, rather than relying on massive annual conferences. This could reduce the “mega-event” nature of COP meetings and make negotiations more routine and technical.
- Encouraging informal, non-text-based dialogue spaces to complement formal treaty-making.

However, participants also cautioned that reforms face limits. The COP is inherently political, driven by national interests, and shaped by a lack of shared understanding and trust. Many countries approach negotiations defensively, aiming to protect existing positions rather than advance collective ambition. They also pointed to the absence of clear binding targets comparable to trade agreements.

Finally, while acknowledging the shortcomings of the process, some participants emphasized that the COP system still played a crucial role in keeping climate change on the global agenda and driving broader action, even when formal negotiated outcomes fall short. The COP process has placed climate change at the centre of international political and economic agendas. When negotiations fail to deliver ambitious outcomes, the global visibility of climate issues has still accelerated action in cities, states, businesses, and financial markets. In many cases, real progress—such as renewable energy expansion and electrification—has been driven indirectly by the political momentum generated through this global climate dialogue.

Overall, the discussion underscored that meaningful reform requires not just procedural fixes, but addressing underlying political dynamics, trust deficits, and expectations placed on the COP process. They agreed that possible reforms include decentralizing climate action events, focusing COP meetings on negotiations and implementation review, strengthening coordination between climate weeks and negotiations, and exploring more permanent negotiation structures.

Ultimately, progress will depend on political leadership from future COP presidencies and the willingness of countries to rethink how global climate governance should function.