

Adapting to a new reality



AOSIS Chair Diann Black-Layne addresses the Regional Training Webinar for the Caribbean on 24 February 2021

The European Capacity Building Initiative (ecbi) has [organised](#) training for new developing country climate change negotiators for several years now. As part of these training sessions, “mock negotiations” are used to give trainee negotiators a taste of the real thing. This part of the training workshops was left out initially when the workshops made a quick transition to an online webinar format last year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the second Regional Training Webinar for the Caribbean which took place on 24 February 2021, however, we trialled online mock negotiations.

The first [Regional Training Webinar for the Caribbean](#) took place on 17 November 2020, and provided the trainees (nominated by National Focal Points for the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC) with a background of the UNFCCC negotiations; the science of climate change; climate geopolitics and the international governance framework; and key issues for the Caribbean region and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) currently under negotiation. Admittedly, it was difficult to get the trainees to engage, interact, and network like they do during the physical workshops. This was also [our experience](#) during the Regional Training Webinar for Asia and the Pacific, which took place on 21 July 2020.

To try and address these challenges, we decided to trail a virtual mock negotiations session during the second part of the Regional Training Webinar for the Caribbean. The trainees were sent the text to be negotiated a week in advance, with the ecbi [Pocket Guides](#) as background material to help them prepare, and divided into four negotiating groups. They were encouraged to meet virtually in advance of the session to prepare.



Ambassadors Carlos Fuller and Janine Felson from Belize, and Kishan Kumarsingh, lead negotiator for Trinidad and Tobago, address the Webinar

During the first half of the two-hour webinar, the trainees received practical advice on preparing for climate change negotiations from veteran climate negotiators from the region, including AOSIS Chair Diann Black-Layne; lead negotiator for Trinidad and Tobago Kishan Kumarsingh, who had also Co-Chaired the Ad-hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform (ADP); and Ambassadors Carlos Fuller and Janine Felson from Belize.

During the second half, they were given a little bit of time in breakout groups, and then thrown into the deep end to negotiate the text under seasoned UNFCCC Chair Kumarsingh. It was gratifying to see they took to online negotiating like fish to water. They were clearly prepared – some groups had even met in advance to discuss their position, as directed, and were ready with detailed textual changes. The only problem was the shortage of time, but despite that they were even able to find time to make concessions and suggest compromises.

On our part, we learnt from the webinar and the feedback from trainees that next time we need to build in more time for the mock negotiations. They are always the most engaging part of the workshops. Moreover, training in negotiating online may soon become essential, as the UNFCCC considers whether to negotiate online in advance of the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26).

Climate change negotiations ground to a halt in 2020, just as the world was gearing up to launch a “decade of action” to ramp up climate ambition and implement the Paris Agreement. When COP26 had to be postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, remaining work on operationalising the Paris Agreement had to be suspended, and the submission of updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by countries was delayed. Undeniably, momentum was lost.

As the situation remains uncertain, the UNFCCC Bureau is now debating whether negotiations should take place online, to avoid a further loss of momentum. In February, the UN Secretary-General **called** on Parties to the UNFCCC to negotiate formally online to prepare for COP26. “The stakes are too high to do otherwise,” he said. The UNFCCC Bureau met recently to **discuss this possibility**, but some developing countries opposed virtual negotiations, saying they would disadvantage developing countries due to poor internet connections, time zone differences, and lack of interpretation. The decision on whether virtual preparatory sessions will be held has now been postponed to the end of March.

While our one small experience in mock negotiations clearly does not mean that the world is ready for virtual negotiations, it does show promise. Admittedly, there were problems – at least two trainees who participated in the first November 2020 Webinar said they could not participate in the second Webinar due to connectivity issues. And there were no time zone differences. But if these problems could be overcome, at least the preparatory UNFCCC sessions could take place virtually, particularly during crucial periods such as the current one, when even developing country groups such as AOSIS feel virtual sessions should take place to avoid further delays to climate action.

Solutions for the connectivity problems have been proposed – for instance, by booking rooms for the negotiators in national/ regional UN offices or hotels in-country, where internet connections are better. Interpretation issues

could possibly be overcome with a technology fix. For the time zone issue, sessions could be staggered to avoid disadvantaging any one country. Jetlag is already par for the course when negotiators travel to physical sessions, so awkward hours for some sessions may not be that big a disadvantage. The advantage, on the other hand, is that negotiating team sizes need not be limited, and negotiators can be supported by their entire national infrastructure. Over time, this may even allow greater participation of sub-national and local entities, who will play a critical role in implementing the Paris Agreement as gears shift to implementation mode.

What may be difficult to replicate online, however, is the human element of climate diplomacy – in-the-corridor chats, bilateral negotiations, and friendships among negotiators which play a key part in overcoming obstacles. Online negotiations cannot therefore completely replace physical meetings, particularly during crucial junctures such as the completion of the Paris Agreement rulebook, the global stocktakes, and (hopefully) “ambition COPs” that should follow the global stocktakes, to drive higher ambition in new NDCs.

For our part, we plan to continue to explore the potential of a hybrid approach for our negotiator training sessions. We would still like to give our trainees the opportunity to get to know each other in person, and for senior negotiators to spot potential in our trainees and to mentor them during sessions. But for some training elements, online training can certainly be more efficient. We will continue to monitor its effectiveness.

Feedback from our trainees on the mock negotiations

- *“I enjoyed working with my group members to come up with a position prior to the mock negotiations. This gave me real insight in how to go about preparing for the negotiations and understanding slightly the process.”* – **Kareem Reynolds**, Belize
- *“I liked the actual interaction amongst the group, discreet, professional and very realistic.”* – **Kemuel Jn Baptiste**, St. Lucia
- *“The Lead Negotiator role played the negotiating scenario really well and it shows that there are no passes for participants.”* – **Jason Ernest**, St. Lucia
- *“The practical negotiation session was particularly useful especially following the context setting and background information.”* – **Kerricia Hobson**, Grenada
- *“I liked how realistic the negotiations were.”*

Feedback on the Pocket Guides

- *“The Pocket Guides are my go-to resource when I need to quickly find information I need, so I find them to be very useful.”* – **Kerricia Hobson**, Grenada
- *“The Pocket Guides are very useful. It helps to build a foundation for persons who are not familiar with the intricacies of climate change negotiations.”* – **Jason Ernest**, St. Lucia
- *“Extremely useful. Provided insight and background information to support better preparation and understanding the rules of engagement.”* – **Kemuel Jn Baptiste**, St. Lucia
- *“Very easy to understand and user-friendly.”* – **Jevanah LaRose**, Guyana
- *“The (finance) Pocket Guides was very useful. It allowed me to understand climate financing better and the history of decisions about it.”* – **Kareem Reynolds**, Belize
- *“A great synopsis of each topic, especially the Guide to the Paris Agreement.”*

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