

Quo Vadis COP?

Future Arrangements for
Intergovernmental Meetings
under the UNFCCC –
Settled and Fit for Purpose

2024 Update

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Policy Report

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Part I. Background and Summary	6
1.1. Outline of the Update	6
1.2. Reason and Purpose of the Update	7
1.3. Background	9
A. The Institutional Set Up	9
B. The ‘Mega-COP Triad’	9
C. Global Climate Action Activities	10
1.4. Three Key Problems	12
1.5. Conclusions	13
A. What to do?	13
B. How to do it? (COP 30)	14
Part II: Why the Decentralised Model?	15
2.1. The Evolution of the Mega-COP Triad	15
A. Negotiations	15
B. Summits	17
C. Climate Expos	17
2.2. Why mega-COPs?	20
2.3. Functions of the mega-COP	20
Triad 2.4. Benefits of Disaggregation	21
A. Equity	22
B. Expectation management	22
C. Targeted political input	22
D. Raising climate ambition	22
Part III: Drivers of Increased Participation	25
Introduction	25
3.1 Setting the stage – a first look at the data	26
3.2. Drivers of Growing Delegation Sizes	29
A. Why the growth? It is not the workload	29
B. It is not the general level of involvement in the UNFCCC process at SBs	29
C. ‘Yes, (Prime) Minister’ – the FOMO effect	30
D. Number of ministries	32
E. Delegation overflow	34
F. The ‘nostalgia’ component	34
3.3. Taking stock: the pull of high-level delegates and summit ‘nostalgia’	35

Executive Summary

Our [Quo Vadis COP? Future Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings under the UNFCCC – Settled and Fit for Purpose](#) (March 2021) was premised on the fact that the purpose of the multilateral climate negotiations had shifted from negotiating multilateral treaties to implementing them. This shift of focus, our Report argued, needed to be reflected in a shift in the role and functioning of the involved multilateral bodies, in particular the Conference of the Parties (COP) and its Subsidiary Bodies (SBs). Did it?

Our assessment in this Update of the 2021 Report is that the current arrangements, to be blunt, are not fit for the current purpose. We argue that it is time to make urgent and important decisions to guide the reforms needed as early as possible. Not doing so would have major negative consequences for the multilateral climate regime, exactly at a time when we most need a well-working system the most.

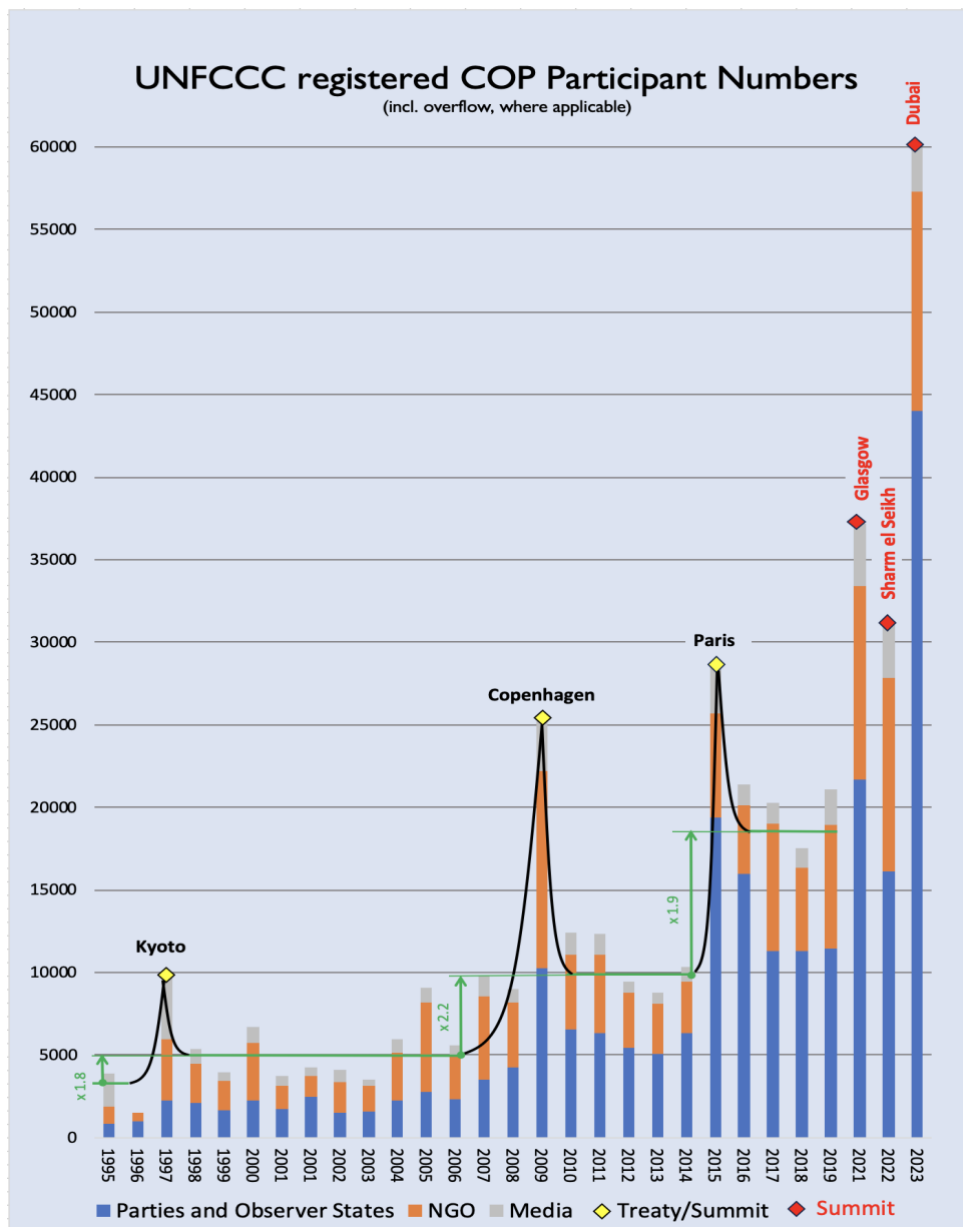


Figure 1. Historic Evolution of COP participant numbers

Challenges and Dangers

There has been an extraordinary growth in the size and complexity of the annual sessions of the governing bodies of the existing multilateral climate treaties – generally referred to as “COPs” – not only in terms of participant numbers (see Figure 1), but in the number of co-located events and associated costs.

This 2024 Update focuses on three major issues arising from such ‘mega-COPs’:

- Equity concerns, as the most climate vulnerable states can no longer afford to preside over or host COPs and showcase their plight; indeed, even larger countries with higher capacities shy away from hosting mega-COPs, drastically reducing the inclusiveness of the multilateral process.
- Negotiations benefit from serendipitous encounters between participants, but the size of mega-COPs prevents this from happening easily.
- Last, but not least, mega-COPs pose a serious reputational risk for the multilateral climate change negotiations. Not only is there the risk of the mega spectacle leading to an inflation of the general public’s expectations with regard to outcomes, but they may even pose an obstacle to appreciate the successes of more focused outcomes such as the Global Stocktake (GST), enhanced transparency reports, and newly-submitted Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). The hype may lead to expect outcomes which are not meant to be delivered by negotiations in implementation mode, leading to the perception of these events as overblown multilateral jamborees/junkets.

Our Recommendations

Our Update identifies a triad of distinct events happening at current COPs:

Negotiations (sessions of the Governing Bodies and SBs), *summit meetings*, and *trade expositions*. All are, no doubt, important but they do not have to happen at the same time in the same place. The fact that they currently are co-located and take place concurrently was not a matter of design but happened mainly for the sake of organisational convenience.

Decentralisation. This is why we propose to spatio-temporally disaggregate the mega-COP triad as follows:

- **COPs:** To be held (purely as sessions of the Governing Bodies and SBs) in Bonn at the World Conference Center (where capacity is 5,000 participants), following the model of the mid-year SB sessions (without a ministerial high-level segment).
- **COP Presidency (Climate) Summits:** To be held (if possible, only in specific years when political leadership is required) in the COP Presidency’s region (possibly in conjunction with the Expos) or at the UN in Geneva. For NDC submission years, the Summit could be held nine months before the COP, when NDCs are due.
- **COP Presidency (Climate) Expos:** To take place in the UN region holding the rotating COP Presidency (but not necessarily in the country of the Presidency).

Partial Repurposing of the Governing/Subsidiary Bodies

Regarding the Governing/Subsidiary Bodies, we furthermore propose that their purpose be modified to better suit implementation. While negotiating texts with a view to produce consensus documents (such as a ‘Decision’ of the relevant body) may still from time to time be required, there may be other activities which these bodies could engage in to facilitate ambitious implementation of the existing treaties.

How to do it? (COP30)

The first thing to remember is that the proposed decentralisation of the event triad currently co-located at mega-COPs does not require a multilateral decision. It is within the mandate of COP Presidencies and, therefore, for COP30, nothing stands in the way of this happening if the Brazilian Presidency decides that this is what it would like to do: to begin a historic transformation of the COPs, while at the same time addressing the challenge of hosting a COP in Belém. Thus, one could have the following decentralisation structure:

- ***COP30 Presidency NDC Summit in Belem:*** Held nine months before the COP when NDCs are due, the event would provide incentives for leaders to arrive at the Summit with ambitious pledges. Few would want to be the laggards.
- ***COP 30 Presidency Climate Expo in Rio:*** Leveraging Rio's infrastructure for hosting large events, this expo would encompass pavilions, exhibition stands, the Global Climate Action Hub, and other information-outreach events (including an expanded roster of side events).
- ***COP 30 (Governing Bodies session) in Bonn (or Brasilia/Belem):*** For negotiators and some civil society representatives (i.e. those directly engaged in the negotiations), this would enable giving adequate time and attention to the COP30 mandates for revising the adaptation communication guidance and any follow-up work related to the new collective quantified goal on climate finance and the 2023 GST.

This would increase engagement and economic benefits across Brazil. Media could better follow the key stories at various sites. Negotiators could focus on their tasks, while others could showcase their climate action to a more dedicated audience. In addition, ***attendance at COP Presidency events that are not co-located with the negotiations can be capped by the Presidencies in question*** (which is not possible if pink badges are involved). This means that if, say, the Summit and the negotiations must be held in the same place (Belém), then they must be temporally separated so pink badges will not grant admission to the Summit.

Part I. Background and Summary

1.1. Outline of the Update

Part I Section 1.2 describes the reason and purpose for updating ecbi’s 2021 report [Quo Vadis COP? Future Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings under the UNFCCC – Settled and Fit for Purpose](#). Section 1.3 provides some background on the institutional setup of the multilateral climate negotiations, including various non-state events that happen concurrently, such as activities in support of the [Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action](#). We use the recent ‘mega-COP’ in Dubai as a touchstone to explore how such large-scale COPs have come about. Section 1.4 then turns to three key problems that have been associated with this mega-COP format, and Section 1.5 considers how to address them?

Part II (Why the Decentralised Model?) questions whether mega-COPs are fit for purpose. We outline how they are the product of an organic evolution of different types of events: Negotiations, Summits, and Climate Expos. This part explores purposes for the key areas of the mega-COPs and reasons often provided for continuing to co-locate the Negotiations, Summit, and Expo. We show that the evolution of COPs and co-location does not further the implementation-focused needs of the negotiations. Finally, this section concludes with a description of the benefits of disaggregation: equity, expectation management, targeted political input, and better chances for raising climate ambition.

Part III (Drivers of Increased Participation) examines candidate factors driving delegation growth at recent COPs and the potential for holding these conferences in smaller venues. Our in-depth analysis of participant data in Section 3.2 suggests that increased delegation sizes stem from high-level/ministerial attendance and a ‘summit nostalgia’ effect, rather than workload or broader engagement with the UNFCCC. High-level participation, particularly by heads of state, attracts a cascade of additional delegates due to a ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO). The nostalgia effect encourages delegations to, in more recent years, replicate their large-scale participation at COP21 in Paris, adding symbolic weight to delegation size beyond negotiation needs. We further note a discrepancy between delegation size evolution at COPs and mid-year SB meetings, where attendance is more stable. In Section 3.3, we take stock and conclude that if the summit component is separated, COPs could be effectively conducted in smaller venues, as demonstrated by smaller delegations at non-summit COPs.

1.2. Reason and Purpose of the Update

The growth of participant numbers in the annual multilateral climate change sessions of the “Conferences of the Parties” (COPs), depicted in Figure 1, has for some time been a cause for concern, even consternation – at least since the last ‘treaty COP’¹ in Paris (2015).

We highlight three challenges for negotiations posed by such mega-COPs. First, there are equity concerns. Climate-vulnerable states, particularly small island states and poor countries, can no longer afford to preside over or host COPs, and thereby expose Parties to the frontlines of the climate crisis. Marginalised groups, in turn, face the problem of their voices being lost amid the din. It might, in theory, be useful to have business and state leaders interact with Indigenous Peoples affected by deforestation and droughts. However, in practice, this is not happening. The venues are so large, and delegates tend to stay in their orbit, often unaware of events in other spaces.

Second, negotiations benefit from ‘serendipitous’ meetings. A lot happens in the hallways. Multiplying the number of people, and putting additional strains on their time, reduces the chances of running into the “right person at the right time”. Negotiators often report running across the venue or having to miss meetings because of over-filled schedules and distances between meeting rooms.

Third, and perhaps most fundamental, mega-COPs pose a serious reputational risk for the multilateral climate negotiations and process writ large. Bringing together tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people for an event ostensibly devoted to multilateral climate governance amplifies the general public’s expectations of COP outcomes beyond what the process was set up to deliver post-Paris, which is a sequence of smaller outcomes to support implementation of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement – such the GST, enhanced transparency reports, and new NDCs. The hype surrounding the mega-COPs now means that many expect more ‘glamorous’ outcomes, such as new global agreements on mitigation or financial pledges. Failure to live up to these inflated expectations is bound to erode the reputation of climate multilateralism (which would be perceived as ‘just a mega talking shop’) and raise the question of whether it is fit for purpose.

In 2021, an ecbi Report, titled *Quo vadis COP? Future Arrangements for Intergovernmental Meetings under the UNFCCC* (‘the 2021 Report’), proposed a ‘settled and fit for purpose’ model which split COPs in two. On the one hand, the negotiations – the annual sessions of the Governing and Subsidiary Bodies of the multilateral climate treaties (UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Kyoto Protocol) – were to be settled at their default location, Bonn, the seat of the UNFCCC Secretariat. The problem with this proposal was, and is, that Bonn can only accommodate approximately 5000 participants, corresponding to the ‘normal’ COP size between Kyoto and Copenhagen (Figure 1).

Thus, the 2021 Report proposed annual Global Climate Action Weeks that would encompass the broad range of other climate events, meetings, and action spaces currently happening at the COPs. It suggested “*that COP sessions (COPs) should be slimmed down in size considerably to deal with technical matters related to implementation. Political elements, meanwhile, can be dealt with in processes outside the COPs that have already been established*

¹ ‘Treaty-COP’ here refers to a COP where a multilateral climate treaty was (meant to have been) agreed, i.e., Kyoto (1997), Copenhagen (2009) and Paris (2015). See Figure 1.

to support implementation on the ground – such as the [Global Climate Action agenda](#), the [Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action](#), the [Regional Climate Weeks](#), and the technical meetings and workshops that support countries in formulating and implementing policies and measures in support of climate ambition.”²

The need to update the 2021 Report is evident, as the last COP considered in the 2021 Report was the 2019 COP (COP25, presided over by Chile and held in Madrid). As the 2021 Report highlighted, the ‘normal’ size of a COP doubled after each ‘treaty COP’ (Kyoto, Copenhagen, Paris), with the post-Paris, non-summit norm of 20,000 (Parties, NGOs, and media). There has been considerable change since 2019. In Glasgow (2021), the UK was the first to host a Summit at a non-treaty COP. Since then, it has become a ‘new normal’ for COPs to also host Summits, without an expectation of (or need for) a treaty outcome.

The purpose of this 2024 Update is to take this ‘new normal’ into account, as well as the fact that the climate action aspects of the COP have grown considerably into what could be termed ‘Global Climate Action Expos’, in deference to the name of the COP 28 venue (“Expo City”).



Source: [Ainger \(2023\)](#). Photographer: Dominika Zarzycka/NurPhoto via Getty Images

However, while this Update will look at the role played by these Expos and Summits in current COPs, the principal focus remains (as in the 2021 Report) on the negotiations and, in particular, whether the *proposed settled and slimmed down model remains desirable (Part II) and feasible (Part III), given these new developments.*

² Executive Summary, 2021 Report.

1.3. Background

A. The Institutional Set Up

The international climate change regime has three multilateral treaties: The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, adopted 1992, entry into force 1995); the Kyoto Protocol (adopted 1997, entry into force 2005); and the Paris Agreement (adopted 2015, entry into force 2016). The governing bodies are:

- the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention;
- the COP serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP); and
- the COP serving as Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA).

‘COP’ is often used to refer collectively to (the joint sessions of) these supreme bodies and, following its usage in the 2021 Report, we shall use this narrow interpretation of the acronym for the purposes of this background section (itself based on Parts I and V of the 2021 Report).

The main role of the COP in this narrow sense is to take decisions, including on procedural, administrative, and substantive arrangements. The COP also reviews implementation of the treaties and other legal instruments and decisions it has adopted.³ For example, the COP annually reviews emissions inventories and National Communications submitted by Parties.

Unless Parties decide otherwise, COPs take place every year. The dates of these meetings are agreed well in advance. The default venue of the COP is at the headquarters of the UNFCCC Secretariat, in Bonn, Germany, unless Parties decide otherwise. With the exception of COP5 in 1999, COP6-bis in 2001, and COP23 in 2017, all the COPs have been in locations other than Bonn and have been hosted by Parties, at considerable cost to the hosts.⁴ The COP Presidency normally rotates among the five UN-recognized regions: Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe and Others. As these conferences continue to expand in size, complexity, and cost, hosting them is not possible for many Parties – and those that do host them are often unable to recoup the costs involved. In addition to the COP, the permanent Subsidiary Bodies (SBs) normally meet twice a year: once on their own in Bonn and once in parallel with COPs, when the costs are covered by the host country.

Over the past 24 years, there has been an exponential growth not only in the number of participants but also in the number of events either co-hosted with COPs in the same venue or held in other nearby venues during the conference. A notable example is the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (see 1.3.C).

B. The ‘Mega-COP Triad’

It was clear that in Expo City Dubai, where COP28 convened, three distinct events were taking place, namely:

- [1] “**Negotiations**”: sessions of the three governing bodies established by the three treaties: the COP which is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention, the CMP, and the CMA, as well as their Subsidiary Bodies. In addition, side events focused on providing

³ [What are governing, process management, subsidiary, constituted and concluded Bodies?](#) UNFCCC.int.

⁴ [Fiji and Bonn, an unusual partnership to host COP23 climate talks](#), France24, 5 November 2017.

input to or commentary on the negotiations have also proven to be useful to engage negotiators and civil society.

- [2] a “**Global Climate Action Summit**” (**Climate Summit**): a meeting of heads of state and government – which originally took place to mark “treaty COPs” (Kyoto, Copenhagen, and Paris), but which since 2021 (Glasgow COP26), have become an annual fixture.
- [3] a “**Global Climate Action Expo**” (**Climate Expo**): called Expo here in deference to the COP28 venue (Expo City, Dubai), covering the wide range of climate action events in the multilateral “Blue Zone” and the host country “Green Zone”. The latter is the space for non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and civil society to advocate, showcase innovations, and create alliances and collaborations to support implementation. This broadly construed “Expo” of late also includes the ever-increasing number of pavilions (paid for and hosted by Parties and others).

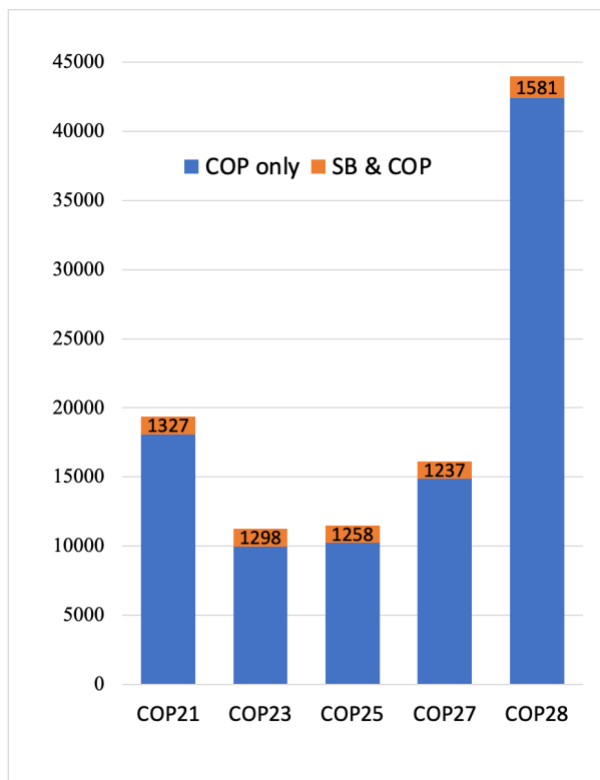


Figure 2. Pink Badges

As illustrated in Figure 1, by far the largest share of Blue Zone badges was Party (pink) badges. It is interesting to look at the composition of Party delegations. For example, among the pink badges of one of the larger delegations, at least one third, as far as could be gauged from the participant list, were for private sector participants, and three times as many as ministries. Moreover, less than four percent (1581) of COP Party delegates were also at the preceding SB meetings in Bonn in June 2023.

The core negotiators go to the COPs and the intersessional SBs in Bonn. Interestingly, over the past few COPs (since Paris), the total number of these core negotiators has been remarkably stable between 1300 and 1600 (Figure 2), regardless of the massive fluctuations in the number of pink badges overall.

C. Global Climate Action Activities

COPs nowadays feature a wide range of activities aimed at promoting climate action, including:

- Marrakesh Partnership for Global Climate Action events
- Events held at the pavilions for countries and other organizations
- Exhibition booths
- Side events unrelated to the negotiations

These events fulfil important functions in the regime, as we highlighted in the 2021 Report. They can further implementation, secure new pledges, bring together stakeholders, and raise important new ideas. Yet, they were not designed as part of the negotiations. They were added

on to the COPs as default location. For example, the number of requests for side events has exploded, leading to organisations co-hosting side events and attempting to convey twice the content in the same amount of time. However, many proposed official side events are rejected and are now hosted by pavilions organised (at considerable cost) by countries, international organizations, and larger NGOs. This has contributed to the Expo-type feel of the COPs, along with the various events convened by the Marrakech Partnership, which is a good example of how the COP has grown ‘organically’ (or ‘cancerously’ as some might say).

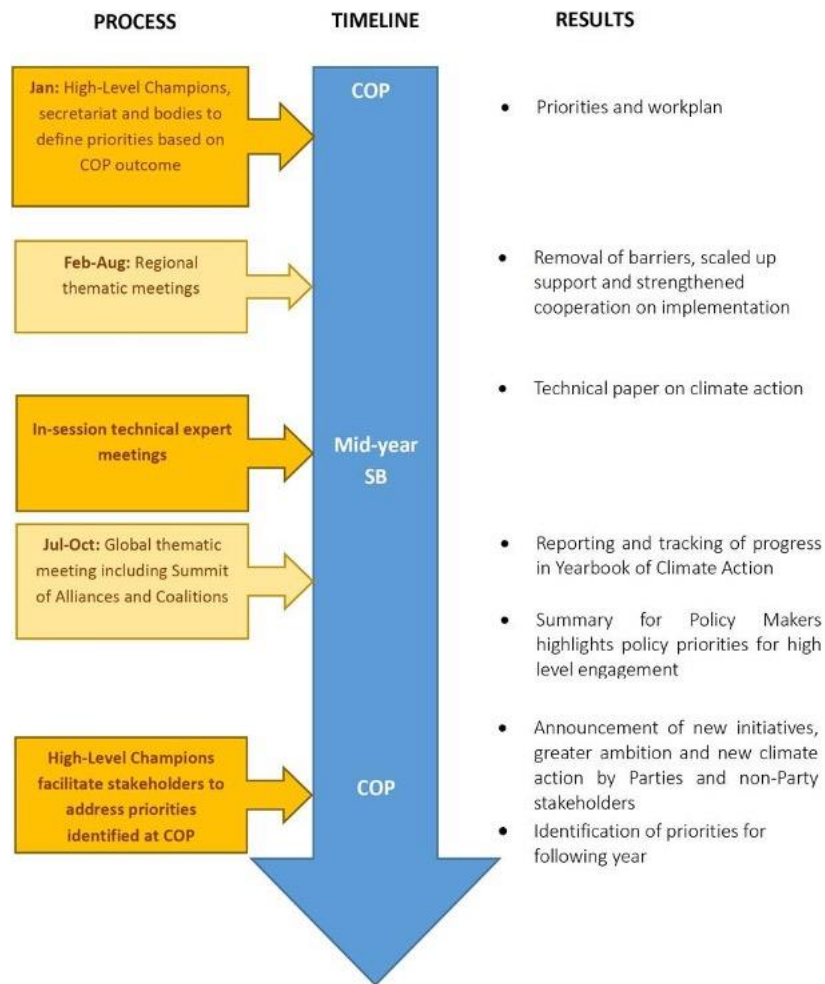


Figure 3. Marrakech Partnership Annual Engagement Cycle

The Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (the Partnership) was launched at COP22 (Marrakech, November 2016) by High-level Climate Champions Hakima El Haite (COP22 Presidency) and Laurence Tubiana (COP21 Presidency).

The Partnership has increased in size and scope since its inception. Importantly, adaptation has become more of a focus. Some of this growth has been planned and overseen by an advisory group. However, for the most part, the timing and nature of the events diverges from the original intention. The Partnership is intended to enable:

- *The convening of stakeholders on an ongoing basis to enhance collaboration and catalyse the scaling up of efforts to collectively identify and address barriers to enhanced implementation, including through the technical examination processes on pre-2020 climate action and multi-stakeholder high-level dialogues.*
- *The showcasing of successes and providing a platform for new initiatives and greater ambition through events, including those held in conjunction with sessions of UNFCCC*

bodies as well as other relevant forums, culminating in the annual High-level Event on Climate Action to be held in conjunction with each COP.

- *Tracking of progress, through NAZCA, of actors and initiatives aligned towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, and supporting the delivery of NDCs and the Sustainable Development Goals.*
- *Reporting achievements and options to enhance action to the COP.*

The original timing and location of meetings is indicated in Figure 3. The mobilisation of non-State actors through the Partnership was initially viewed as an input to the COP, not as a parallel event. The ‘Global Thematic Meeting’ was intended to take place in late summer/early autumn and the High-Level Champions would report to the COP.

According to the [launch document](#), the Partnership is “designed to provide a strong foundation for how the UNFCCC process will catalyse and support climate action by Parties and non-Party stakeholders [and] *is complementary and in no way a substitute for negotiations among Parties*” [pp.1-2, emphasis added].

However, these global meetings never took place. Instead, there has been an annual series of Partnership events during COP sessions under the [Global Climate Action](#) umbrella, which includes both the Marrakech Partnership and the (recently suspended) Regional Climate Weeks.

The Global Climate Action events that were added to COP sessions have become the central hub for Climate Expos at COPs and are not a substitute for negotiation sessions. However, they were also not intended to be held during COPs. In short, the manner in which these events were added to COPs demonstrates how we have arrived at the current mega-COPs and suggests that disaggregation should be possible, without detrimental impacts on either the negotiations or the Expos. This is something that is analysed in more detail in Part II of this Update.

1.4. Three Key Problems

Several articles appeared in the press highlighting the record-breaking number of participants at COP28 in Dubai in 2023. Some, like the Carbon Brief Analysis of [Which countries have sent the most delegates to COP28?](#) simply focus on the numbers, while others discuss concerns, such as the size of the meeting’s carbon footprint.⁵ For the purposes of this Update, the most pertinent was John Ainger’s 7 December Bloomberg news article [Dubai’s Gilded COP28 Summit Changes Climate Talks Forever](#), not so much because of his fear that “lavish hospitality stokes fears of distracting negotiations” (although the hosting was extraordinary), but because it mentions two key problems with the current set up:

- (i) **Serendipity:** “[I]mpromptu bilateral meetings with other countries in corridors—often the location where key deals are struck—are impossible due to the size of the venue” and
- (ii) **Inclusiveness:** “The growth of participation and money involved in hosting COPs are leading some to herald the summit as ‘peak COP’—simply through the fact that a dwindling number of countries will be able to host a summit of this scale.”

The problem of providing for inclusiveness goes beyond small countries no longer being able to host COPs: “COP29—which [at the time of writing still had not] found a host due to

⁵ James Reynolds, [COP28 will have the biggest carbon footprint in the event's history after UAE invited a record 400,000 people to attend](#), Daily Mail Online, 2 December 2024.

disagreements with the EU and Russia—could by default be held in the German city of Bonn, the home of the UNFCCC, but [the German government] politely declined to host the meeting due to its immense size, according to people familiar with the matter. There are also concerns over the impact COP30 will have when it's located in the Brazilian city of Belém, in the country's Amazon rainforest.” Indeed, the Bloomberg article reported that Steven Guilbeault, Canadian Minister of Environment and Climate Change, stated: “We wouldn't be able to host an event with 100,000 people in Canada [...] There's no venue where we can do that.”

- (iii) **Reputational Risk** to the multilateral climate change regime is the third problem that must be highlighted, given the disproportionate public expectations of the outcome of such mega-COPs.

With respect to the negotiations, we are in implementation mode, which should not be expected to generate ‘signature’ outcomes, such as new multilateral treaties. The problem is that no decision of the governing bodies short of a treaty—such as the now customary ‘Cover Decisions’ (such as the “Glasgow Pact”, “UAE Consensus”)—will live up to the popular expectation of a mega-COP outcome, with the result being that the negotiations are perceived as just another overblown multilateral talk shop.

1.5. Conclusions

A. What to do?

i. Spatio-temporal Disaggregation of the Mega-COP Triad

Like the 2021 Report, this Update proposes that the negotiations—currently co-located with the Summits and Expos in mega-COPs—be separated both in space and time, as follows:

- **COP Negotiations**: To be held (purely as sessions of the governing and SBs) in Bonn" at the World Conference Center (where capacity is 5,000 participants), following the" model of the mid-year sessions of the SBs (without a ministerial high-level segment).
- **COP Presidency (Climate) Summits**: To be held (if possible, only in specific years when political leadership is required) in the COP Presidency region (possibly in" conjunction with the Expos) or at the UN in Geneva. For NDC submission years, the" Summit could be held nine months before the COP, when NDCs are due.
- **COP Presidency (Climate) Expos**: To take place in the UN region holding the" rotating" COP Presidency (but not necessarily in the country of the Presidency).

As mentioned earlier, the primary focus of this Update, like that of the original Report, is the Negotiations. The issue of whether it would make sense to hold Summits together with Expos or not goes beyond the intended scope of this Update.

ii. Partial Repurposing of the Governing/Subsidiary Bodies

Following the 2021 Report, we have used ‘Negotiations’ as an abbreviation for ‘the sessions of the Governing Bodies and SBs; yet – given we are in implementation mode – this may no longer be entirely apposite, if by ‘Negotiations’ we mean the negotiating of text with a view to produce a consensus document (such as a ‘Decision’ of the relevant Body). While this type of activity may still be required (from time to time), these Bodies could engage in other activities

to facilitate an ambitious implementation of the existing treaties (UNFCCC, Paris Agreement). However, an identification of such implementation support activities by the treaty Bodies goes beyond the scope of this Update.

B. How to do it? (COP 30)

Could such a disaggregation actually happen? This largely depends on whether a future COP Presidency will be brave enough to do it. Clearly, the opportunity for a Bonn-based COP this year has been lost, but maybe Brazil, as Presidency designate of COP30, could lead the way, if only to address the clear problems of hosting a mega-event in Belém. A disaggregated model could look like this:

- ***COP30 Presidency NDC Summit in Belem:*** Held nine months before the COP when NDCs are due, the event would provide incentives for leaders to arrive at the Summit with ambitious pledges. Few would want to be the laggards.
- ***COP 30 Presidency Climate Expo in Rio:*** Leveraging Rio's infrastructure for hosting large events, this event would encompass pavilions, exhibition stands, the Global Climate Action Hub, and other information-outreach events (including an expanded roster of side events).
- ***COP 30 (Governing Bodies session) in Bonn (or Brasilia/Belem):*** For negotiators and some civil society representatives (i.e., those directly engaged in the negotiations), this would enable time and attention to the mandates for COP30, including revising the adaptation communication guidance and any follow-up work related to the new collective quantified goal on climate finance and the 2023 Global Stocktake.

This would increase engagement and economic benefits across Brazil. Media could better follow the key stories at various sites. Negotiators could focus on their tasks, while others could showcase their climate action to a more dedicated audience. In addition, ***attendance at COP Presidency events that are not co-located with the negotiations can be capped by the Presidencies in question*** (which is not possible if pink badges are involved). This means that if, say, the Summit and the negotiations need to be held in the same place (Belém), then they must be temporally separated so pink badges will not grant admission to the Summit.

Part II: Why the Decentralised Model?

This part discusses the arguments for and against the current COP arrangements. It also explores the evolution of the negotiations, Expos, and Summits, the functions they originally intended to serve, and the role these events fulfil now. As Part I showed, COPs have evolved organically. A few thousand people attended COP3 where the Kyoto Protocol was adopted, but now tens of thousands routinely attend and engage in a myriad of events. Part II sets COPs in their modern context as a starting point to question whether this format fits the purpose.

With the climate regime now focused solely on implementation, the modern context of the negotiations is characterized by implementation oversight, which provides few (but foreseeable) high-profile moments. The 2021 Report set out the mandated future agenda items and showed that agendas are expected to become smaller and more technical in the future (see Table 1). With the establishment of the loss and damage fund, all areas under the UNFCCC have constituted bodies, programmes of work, or periodic reviews. Thus, there is no need for ‘major COPs’ as no new sets of rules are expected to be adopted.

The only real opportunities for high-profile moments would be in GST and NDC submission years (and NDCs should be submitted nine months prior to the COP). COP31 in 2026 will be an example of the “new normal.” There will be an overview of the implementation of work under the Convention and Paris Agreement, and countries will submit and peer-review their third biennial transparency reports.

The technical nature of future negotiations creates an expectation gap. Large scale global events create expectations for significant outcomes. For some, this is the role of the Summits: world leaders can join together in new partnerships and initiatives. But, as we discuss below, this approach has its limits.

In this context, it is time to consider what functions the three components that currently make up COPs have evolved to fulfil and whether co-locating the negotiations, Expos, and Summits would be beneficial.

2.1. The Evolution of the Mega-COP Triad

Mega-COPs are the product of the organic growth of different types of events. This section outlines the origins and initial rationales for many of these events and discusses their evolution. Overall, we find little evidence that co-hosting the three types of events has synergistic effects. For example, it does not appear that hosting more side events and pavilions in the Expos benefits the negotiations or the Summits. Instead, we find that these three sites fulfil rather different functions, and co-location may have significant negative impacts on the negotiations. Below, we outline the purpose of the various types of events.

A. Negotiations

The sessions of the three governing bodies (COP, CMP, and CMA) are intended to make multilateral decisions. Historically, the negotiations have focused on negotiating new rules almost as often as overseeing the implementation of existing rules. Figure 4 shows the increased number of agenda sub-items associated with rounds of negotiations for a new agreement, particularly between 2008 and 2012. By 2019, most of the remaining issues were delegated to the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI).

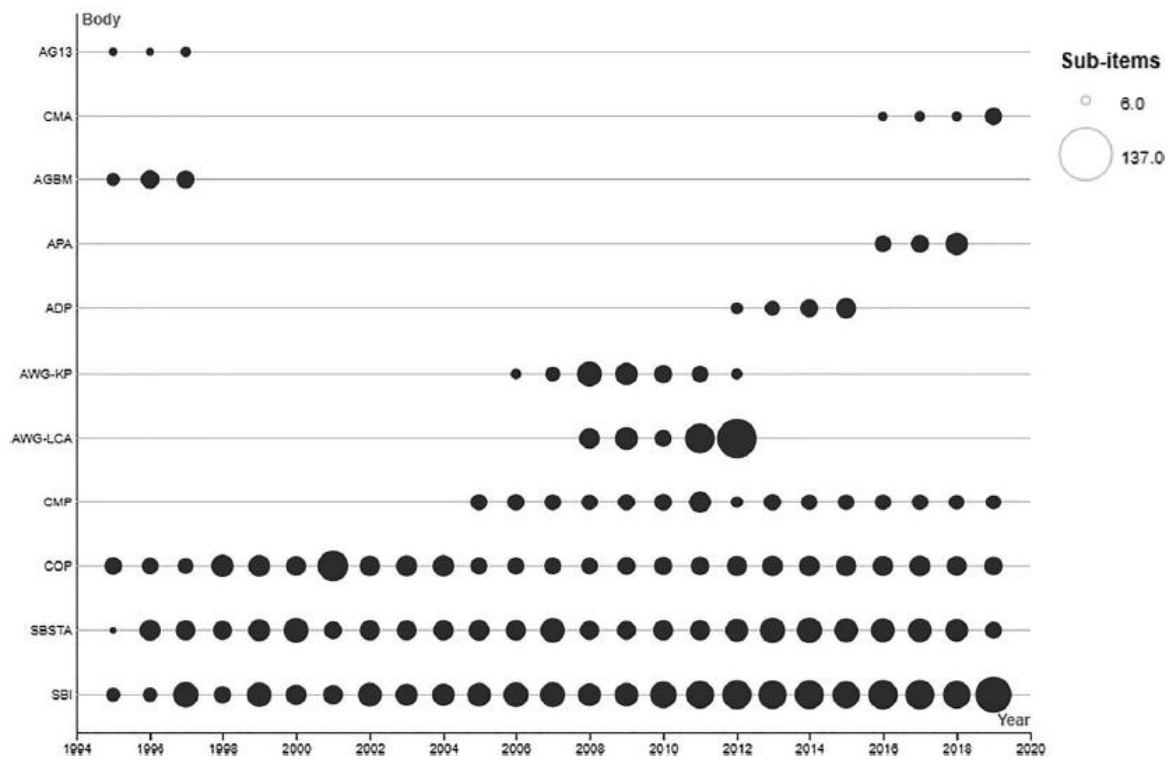


Figure 4. Agenda items and subitems by year

Source: Allan, J. I., and R. R. Bhandary. (2024). [What’s on the agenda? UN climate change negotiation agendas since 1995](#). *Climate Policy*, 24(2), 153-163.

Now, the governing bodies can focus on implementing the Convention and the Paris Agreement. Table 1 outlines the expected deliverables of future COPs, shows the technical nature of the negotiations, and highlights how rarely political input is required going forward.

Table 1. Expected deliverables of future COPs

Year	Negotiation Milestones
2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● NDC submission (March 2025) ● Revise adaptation communication guidance
2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Third Biennial Transparency Report
2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Technology Mechanism periodic assessment ● Review and update information for clarity, transparency, and understanding; and accounting guidance (NDCs) ● Technical phase of the second GST begins
2028	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review and update transparency modalities, procedures, and guidance ● Global Stocktake

Ministers may occasionally need to provide guidance, particularly during the political phase of the GST. Traditionally, only a few ministers are directly involved in the negotiations. Larger meetings have been open to all ministers during the second week of COPs. These tend to be one-off opportunities for ministers to engage and are convened and chaired by the COP Presidency (e.g., the Sejmik in 2018 and Majlis in 2023). Little negotiating happens at these informal events, which offer little guidance on the way forward or the trade-offs that must be made. Instead, this type of political guidance is decided by heads of negotiating teams, engaged ministers leading coalitions on some of the issues, and ministers charged with co-facilitating meetings on outstanding issues. With some foresight and preparation, these informal events could prove to be very useful.

B. Summits

Summits were initially only envisioned for COPs where a new treaty was expected, such as in Copenhagen and Paris. After the failure of Copenhagen in part due to the role played by world leaders who came at the end of the meeting and got roped into negotiations, any potential future role for them in the negotiations was curtailed.

Since the Paris COP, world leaders have been arriving at the beginning of the COPs. They deliver speeches, discuss issues in roundtables on day two, and leave on day three. Their role is political leadership, as exemplified at the Paris COP. However, leadership is now mostly needed domestically to enact and implement climate action. Globally, it is most acutely needed in NDC submission years—nine months before the COP. In Glasgow, the hope was that bringing leaders together would increase pressure on countries to announce stronger NDCs. However, this did not happen. During the last three Summits, significant announcements by individual countries were rare.

The other argument for Summits is to improve high-level coordination to launch new partnerships and initiatives. The Glasgow and Dubai COPs are prime examples of this trend, where new initiatives and partnerships were announced, particularly when world leaders were present during the first week. As they left, the number of press releases announcing new initiatives decreased. The COP in Sharm El-Sheikh featured few such partnership launches. Such initiatives come down to the will, diplomatic capacity, and priorities of the COP Presidencies.

As initiatives of the Presidencies (and outside the UNFCCC process), these partnerships are not subject to systematic follow-up or review. While they may have been created to help strengthen cooperation and provide more momentum for work on specific issues, they are in danger of becoming announcements that lead to few results.

C. Climate Expos

Part I of this report used the Marrakech Partnership as an example of how a climate Expo event can evolve over time. Part II focuses on side events and pavilions.

Side events were traditionally spaces for negotiators, civil society, and others to interact. Delegates would share their national priorities and views, and civil society would attempt to raise new issues for consideration in the negotiations. Over time, an increasing number of events showcase the efforts of international organizations and civil society networks, among others, to achieve on-the-ground climate results.

Applications and allocations for side events continue to rise (see Figure 5). Despite a marked increase in the number of side events, there is still increased demand for COP Presidencies to provide more space for side events and for the Secretariat to approve and convene further events. Much of this demand is from civil society. As Figure 5 below shows, Parties have hosted roughly the same number of events since COP9. The main driver has been NGOs using side events to put forward new ideas or showcase their efforts.

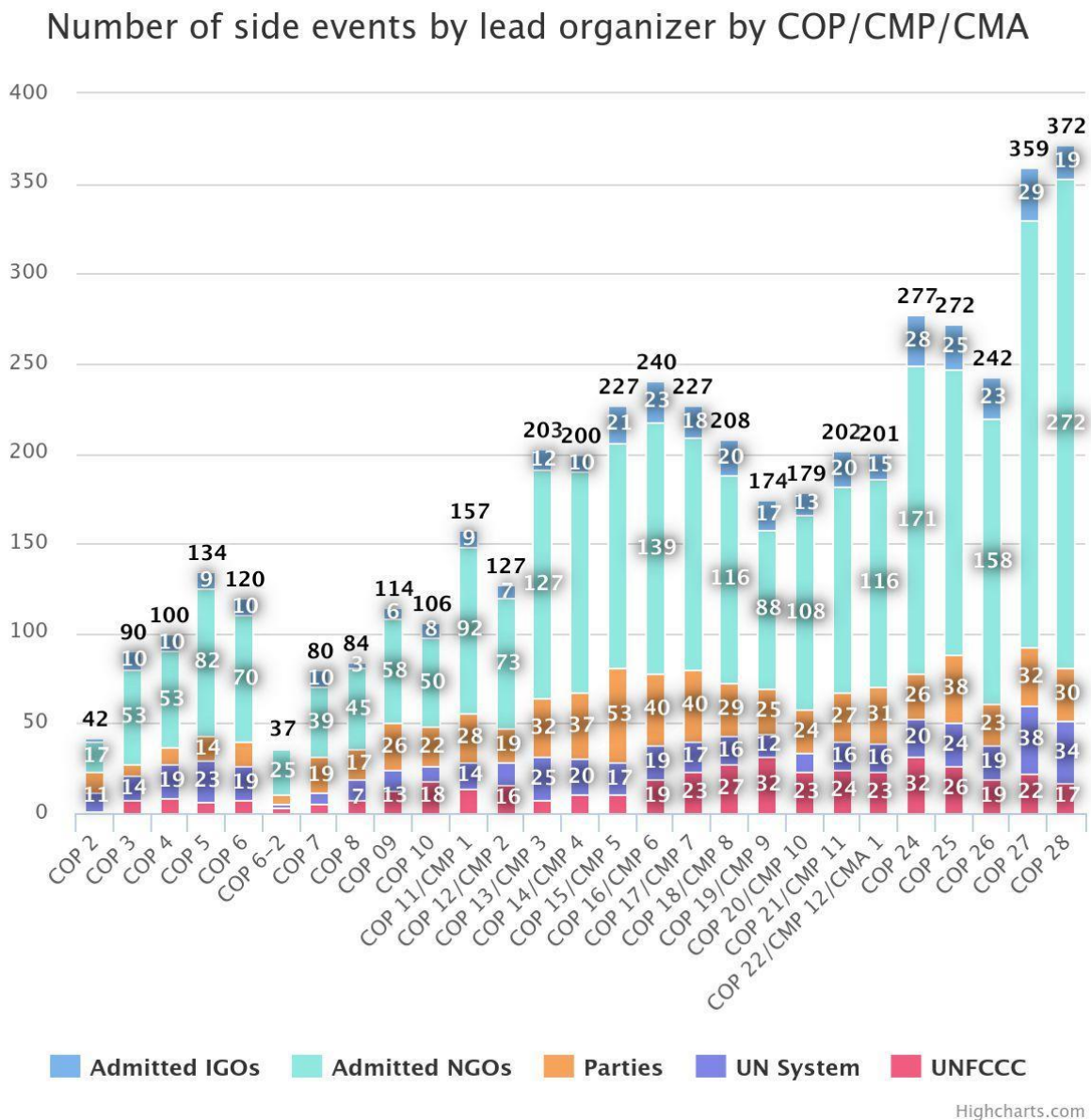


Figure 5. Side events by organizer and COP

Source: UNFCCC statistics on side events and exhibitions <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/parties-non-party-stakeholders/non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-non-party-stakeholders/statistics-on-side-events-and-exhibits>

This increased demand has brought new challenges that can undermine the initial benefits of side events. Negotiators speak to challenges in navigating the side event space, finding the event they might be interested in and be able to attend. Side event organizers often need to find last minute replacements for negotiators unable to speak at their event. The Secretariat

has tried to accommodate the large number of NGOs by asking them to co-host events. This allows greater participation but also dilutes the event with very short presentations by six to 10 speakers and little time for discussion or interaction.

Pavilions and exhibition spaces have likewise seen considerable growth. These were intended to help a range of actors showcase their efforts. Exhibition spaces were open to all and particularly used by civil society. Pavilions were small add-ons traditionally organized by countries.

At COP28, several countries with small delegations rented space within larger pavilions: Libya, Mali, Panama, Singapore, Venezuela, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to name a few. Other countries had independent pavilions despite having small delegation sizes and being part of coalitions with a pavilion (e.g., Italy, Estonia, Oman, the Seychelles).

As Figure 6 below shows, civil society, international organizations, and corporate actors increasingly hire pavilion space (at considerable cost). Several pavilions serve as alternative sites to host events, bypassing the need to apply for side events through the formal channels.

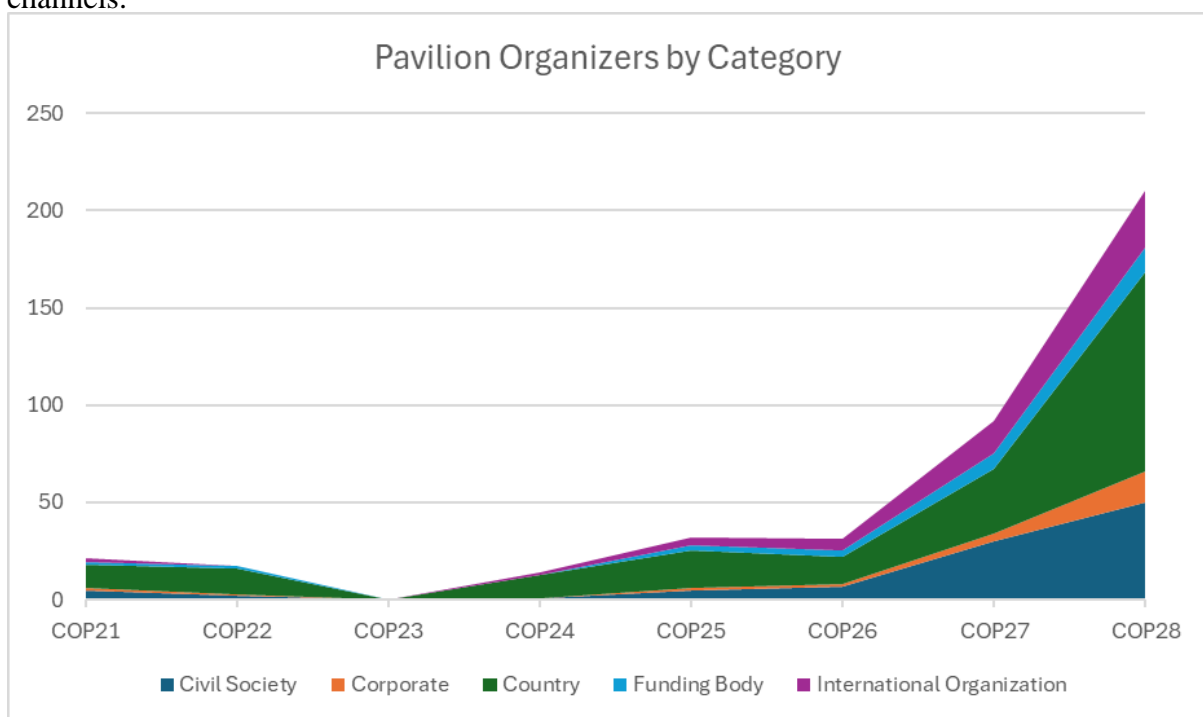


Figure 6. Pavilion organizers by category
 Note: There is no data available for the COP23 pavilions.

While the number of Expo events has grown considerably, providing greater engagement opportunities, the ability of civil society and others to interact with negotiators has also been undermined. Many events suffer from poor attendance because of the sheer number of them. Negotiators often cannot attend, and the attention of ministers is divided. Side events and pavilions used to provide a strong link between negotiators and civil society; however, this no longer seems to be the case.

2.2. Why mega-COPs?

The above discussion hinted at some of the historic reasons for the various events held at COPs, but also questioned the extent to which ‘bigger is better’. In addition, proponents of large-scale COPs cite several reasons to keep the current arrangements. Many relate to the incentives and motivations of COP Presidents, Party delegations, and civil society. One cross-cutting rationale for the myriad of events is to fill the expectation gap between what the media, civil society, and others expect from a large event and what negotiations can deliver.

Benefits for Presidencies: COP Presidencies benefit from mega-COPs because they provide a uniquely large platform to showcase their efforts on climate change and other issues. Hosting Summits is a diplomatic opportunity to liaise with world leaders and discuss various issues. Publicly, the country is centre stage as they are facilitating global cooperation on an important issue. In short, COP Presidencies (perhaps temporarily) become important at the global level.

Benefits for delegations: As Part I showed, national delegations have increased enormously, and the size of Party overflows is a major driver of mega-COP participation. Therefore, these delegations have increased their demand for space. Pavilions are seen as places for delegations to meet internally and with external partners. Delegation offices are now insufficient in size and often kept for the core negotiators, ministers, and others to share information and strategize on next steps.

Pavilions and side events also present opportunities for delegations to showcase their domestic actions on climate change. Some countries see this as particularly important, given the focus on implementation.

Benefits for civil society: Civil society represents a broad group of actors, but many cite similar benefits of mega-COPs. For these actors, too, there is a demand for space to network and collaborate further on ongoing climate projects. This has led to a significant growth in exhibition space. More resourced organizations, notably WWF, have their own pavilions.

This also provides an opportunity for them to showcase their work. Side events are the main vehicle for NGOs to put forward new ideas, illustrate climate action on the ground, and try to influence negotiations.

The benefits that various actors cite have two common threads: showcasing climate action and providing space to network and engage with each other. While these are important for sharing information about what climate policies or activities might work or initiating new collaborations, neither of these benefits relate to the negotiations.

2.3. Functions of the mega-COP Triad

The 2021 Report highlighted a wide range of potential functions of COP-related events. The analysis above and the benefits cited by the proponents show that the actual functions fulfilled by these events are much narrower (see Table 2).

Table 2. Functions of the mega-COP events

Events	Rule making	Impl. Oversight	Raise ambition	New ideas	Showcase action	Networking
Negotiations						
Summits			<i>NDC years</i>			
Expos						

Rulemaking refers to efforts to create or fine-tune decisions where necessary (e.g. by reviewing parts of the Paris Agreement Rulebook). Implementation refers to the oversight role of the COP and CMA to ensure that the Paris Agreement is functioning, for example, by facilitating the submission of national reports.

Raising climate ambition is arguably the most critical function of the regime. Countries must continuously improve their records on mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and means of implementation. The governing bodies, SBs, and constituted bodies have a role in facilitating these actions. Summits could help in NDC submission years (or the year before).

Bringing forward new ideas and sharing information on ongoing initiatives can help raise climate ambition by sharing examples of ‘what works’. Some new ideas may relate to the negotiations, as was traditionally done for side events.

Networking has also become an important aspect of COPs and is increasingly seen as the main annual gathering of major actors working across a range of relevant issues. To an extent, this could be useful for climate change to help connect implementers with funding options (for example). Other non-climate networking also seems increasingly common.

As Table 2 shows, the components of the Triad of Climate Events fulfil largely different functions in the regime. Unfortunately, this means there are few, if any, synergistic benefits of hosting the events together. Negotiators cannot attend side events, civil society struggles to hold countries to account, and the media cannot easily capture the most essential bits and pieces resulting from these events. Ministers’ time is fragmented across events, providing little opportunities to interact with negotiators or civil society.

2.4. Benefits of Disaggregation

Instead, we argue that each component of the Triad would best reach its goals if held separately. Here, we focus on the benefits for the negotiations, some of which were mentioned in Part I.

A. Equity

Climate-vulnerable states could host smaller COPs or COPs could be held in Bonn since only negotiators, a few ministers, and a smaller subset of negotiation-focused civil society representatives would attend. A small island State could host the Expo to bring ministers, civil society, and media to the frontlines of the climate crisis, but they could not host negotiation-focused COPs.

Climate-vulnerable states also often lack the diplomatic capacity to host Summits and facilitate the adoption of declarations or other high-level outcomes. A disaggregated COP does not require such a high degree of diplomatic resources on an annual basis.

B. Expectation management

Large-scale events elicit large-scale expectations. Bringing together world leaders raises the expectations of the public and the media, and requires political outcomes, such as declarations or partnerships, to justify their presence. Such events require considerable resources and raise expectations for such outcomes.

The UNFCCC faces a legitimacy conundrum, as these partnerships, declarations, and other announced initiatives lack follow-up and accountability. Pledges and announcements under the Global Climate Action Agenda also lack scrutiny outside of the Yearbook of Global Climate Action. These events share the UNFCCC's brand, which could come under fire if initiatives fail to realize meaningful outcomes.

C. Targeted political input

Holding Summits only when needed (for example, in GST and NDC years) distinguishes these events as the primary opportunities for high-level political input. NDC Summits would be best hosted nine months before the COP. GST outcomes could be guided at the beginning of the COP or beforehand to help realize an ambitious set of priorities moving forward. Leaders could be better prepared to speak to a specific task rather than reading general speeches.

In practice, the number of ministers required for negotiations is relatively small. Pre-selected ministers would be better prepared and able to represent their coalitions. Other ministers could attend separate Expo-related events (for the mutual benefit of countries and those organizing Expo events). This arrangement would reduce the need for one-off, informal talk shops among all Ministers, which can take entire evenings during the negotiations' crucial last days.

D. Raising climate ambition

A disaggregated model can improve climate ambition in the negotiations in several ways. First, more attention would be paid to the negotiations and ensuring the best possible outcome. Negotiators' attention would not be diverted to supporting ministers and leaders. Presidencies would be able to focus on the negotiations rather than on declarations and other summit and ministerial outcomes.

Second, climate ambition requires strengthened and deepened implementation, which can be achieved with strong technical work to support countries and improve transparency. The multilateral process can facilitate the groundswell of climate action in a way that ensures greater equity and support. Gaps in that support are often discussed in the negotiations, but are

rarely picked up during COPs because of the many stories, press conferences, and “takes” swirling around mega-COPs.

Technical work is less media friendly. The Secretariat and other professional communicators could better focus on translating these complex outcomes for a more general audience without the distractions of Expo or Summit events.

Third, interactions between negotiators and civil society would be more focused. NGOs can bring targeted transparency to the negotiations, helping to shine a light on the findings from the biennial transparency reports and the technical phase of the GST. These important transparency mechanisms of the Paris Agreement can be lost amid the din of mega-COPs. However, they show the actual state of climate action. They are fundamental, arguably more so than Presidency-led declarations, launching new initiatives, and showcasing activities.

Fourth and finally, a smaller COP focused on concrete implementation issues might take the drama out of COPs. Recent focal points in the negotiations have included wording in cover decisions or the GST political outcome. These have sent important signals, achieved through acrimonious negotiations that use the media as a negotiation tactic. There is, sometimes, a sense that the climate negotiations, unique among multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and other global negotiations, are more about wins in the wording than advancing implementation. It is time to “get down to brass tacks” and begin the hard work of implementation and support. This is not done through words in non-mandated cover decisions, but rather through a sharp focus on advancing treaty provisions on the ground.

Part III: Drivers of Increased Participation

Introduction

As part of this report, we conducted a **detailed empirical analysis of participant numbers** and the potential to reduce delegation sizes at COPs to allow for hosting the conferences in venues with smaller capacities.

Our findings reveal that **many countries have demonstrated the ability to operate with more compact delegations akin to pre-Paris Agreement levels**. Yet, there is a **clear trend of increased delegation sizes at summit COPs**, particularly COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, in 2022, and COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in 2023. However, such an expansion is not reflected at the mid-year SB sessions, where participant numbers have remained relatively stable over the years. This stability suggests the workload and negotiation demands have not fundamentally changed in a manner that necessitates larger delegations.

We identify **two main drivers** behind the increase in delegation sizes at recent summit COPs. **First, the presence of high-level officials, including heads of state or government, tends to significantly boost delegation numbers, a phenomenon we attribute to a ‘fear of missing out’ or FOMO**. The resulting cascade effects lead to a substantial increase in both high-level and regular delegates. **Second, there is a ‘summit nostalgia’ pattern, where delegations at recent summit COPs emulate the large sizes and composition seen at COP21 in Paris in 2015**. This replication indicates a nostalgic pull to maintain a visible and substantial presence, regardless of the actual negotiation needs or expected outcomes.

In short, our analysis suggests that the expanded size of delegations at recent summit COPs is driven more by the perceived prestige of the event and less by the functional requirements of the negotiations. By separating the summit element and, in turn, focusing on streamlined, essential participation, we conclude that **it is feasible to host effective COP negotiations in smaller venues**.

In this section, we shed light on some suspected driving forces behind the number of participants in the negotiation process. To this end, we perform a quantitative analysis of delegations across several COP and mid-year Subsidiary Body events from recent years. The overarching question behind this analysis is whether the number of negotiators can be sufficiently reduced such that COP negotiations could take place in locations with smaller capacities, such as Bonn.

The answer is a qualified yes. Even in recent years, many Parties have demonstrated that attending meetings is still possible with smaller delegations. In turn, the presence of a sizeable number of such delegations (covering a wide range of cultural and institutional country backgrounds) shows that no ‘laws of nature’ render it physically impossible for a delegation to serve its purpose if its size is more akin to pre-Paris levels. Data from the mid-year SB sessions also do not show growth rates anywhere near those observed for recent COPs.

On the other hand, our analysis of participant figures from COP21, the ‘Paris-Summit-Treaty COP’, COP23 and COP25 (two COPs without the treaty/summit element), and COP27 and

COP28 (two recent ‘Summit COPs’) and corresponding mid-year SB sessions (SB42, SB46, SB50, SB56, SB58) suggests **(i) a significant ‘fear of missing out’ (FOMO) element** in addition to **(ii) a ‘nostalgia’ component**, which can explain part of why delegations have grown so much over time.

The **FOMO element** is motivated by the observation that delegations where the head of government is present gather a substantial following of both high-level officials and other delegates. Similarly, even beyond presidents, queens/kings, and prime ministers, an additional minister or comparable high-level official is equally associated with a considerably larger delegation.

The **nostalgia component** is rooted in the observation that recent summit COP delegations are more similar in size and composition to the Paris treaty/summit COP (COP21) than subsequent COPs without a summit element.

In what follows, we explain the nature of our data and analysis in more detail.

3.1 Setting the stage – a first look at the data

For the purposes of this analysis, we gathered the final participant lists of COP21, COP23, COP25, COP27, and COP28, as well as the corresponding SB42, SB46, SB50, SB56, and SB58 sessions taking place mid-year. This selection was made to include a sample of all types of recent COPs, which allows us to compare recent treaty/summit COPs and COPs without any explicit treaty/summit element.

Because participant lists were only available in PDF format before COP28, we digitized these lists based on a semi-automated procedure where we made use of OpenAI’s GPT3.5 model (one version of the large language model underlying ChatGPT) to extract delegation participant information, such as name, title, role, and organizational affiliation.⁶ In addition, unless explicitly stated otherwise, our analysis here focuses on delegation members of the core delegation, excluding delegation overflow (not least because these delegates were not named on the participant lists pre-COP28). Hence, the numbers here will be lower than the overall participant figures shown earlier in this report.

With these aspects in mind, we start by providing a descriptive overview of delegation sizes. **Starting with COPs, we can see that recent summit COPs, COP27, and COP28 have experienced both a marked rise in typical delegation sizes and a significant increase in the size of the largest delegations.**

⁶For more information, including the extracted digital participant lists and all corresponding code scripts, consult the companion GitHub repository for this report: github.com/MatthiasRo/Quo_Vadis_COP_2024. Due to the nature of the processing, these lists can contain occasional errors, but the checks we performed suggest a high quality of the automated output.

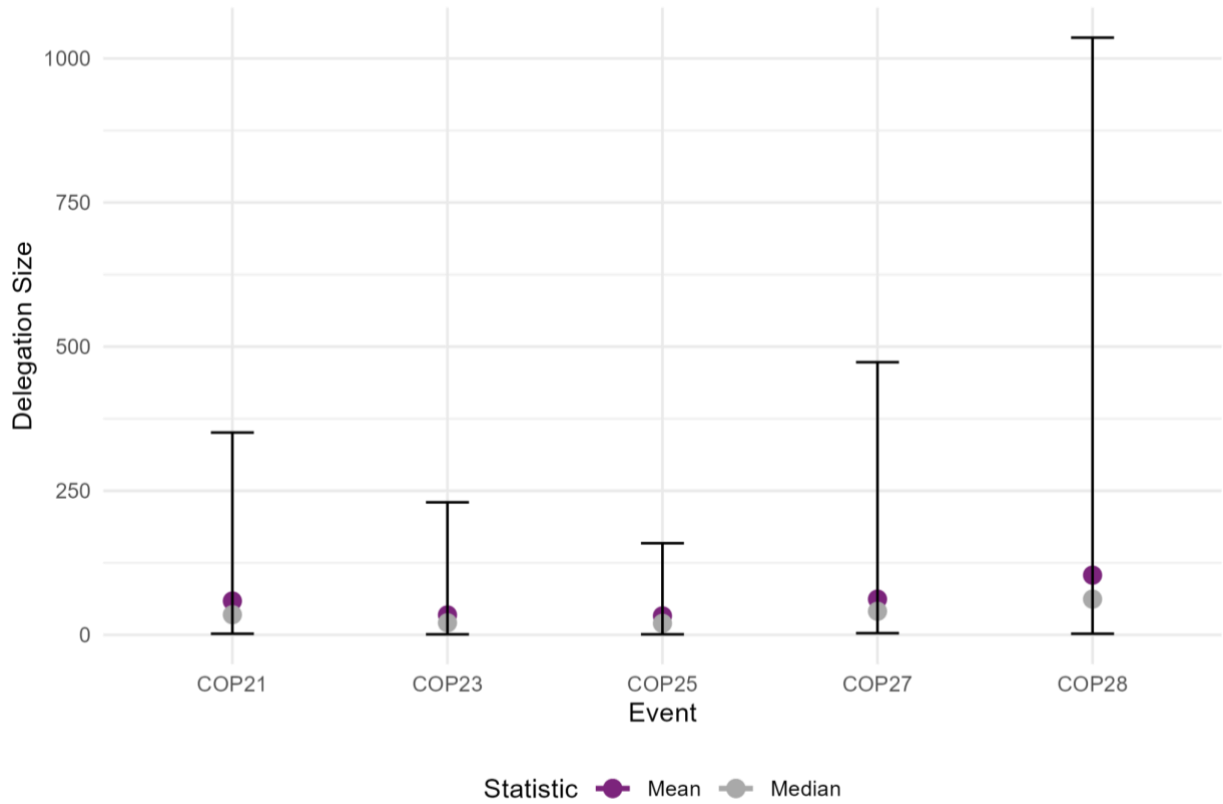


Figure 7. Distribution of COP Delegation Sizes Over Time (min./max. indicated by bars)

However, when we look at mid-year SB sessions during these same years, we do not see a general increase in delegation size over time. Both the averages and the dispersion of delegation sizes have remained remarkably stable over the years.

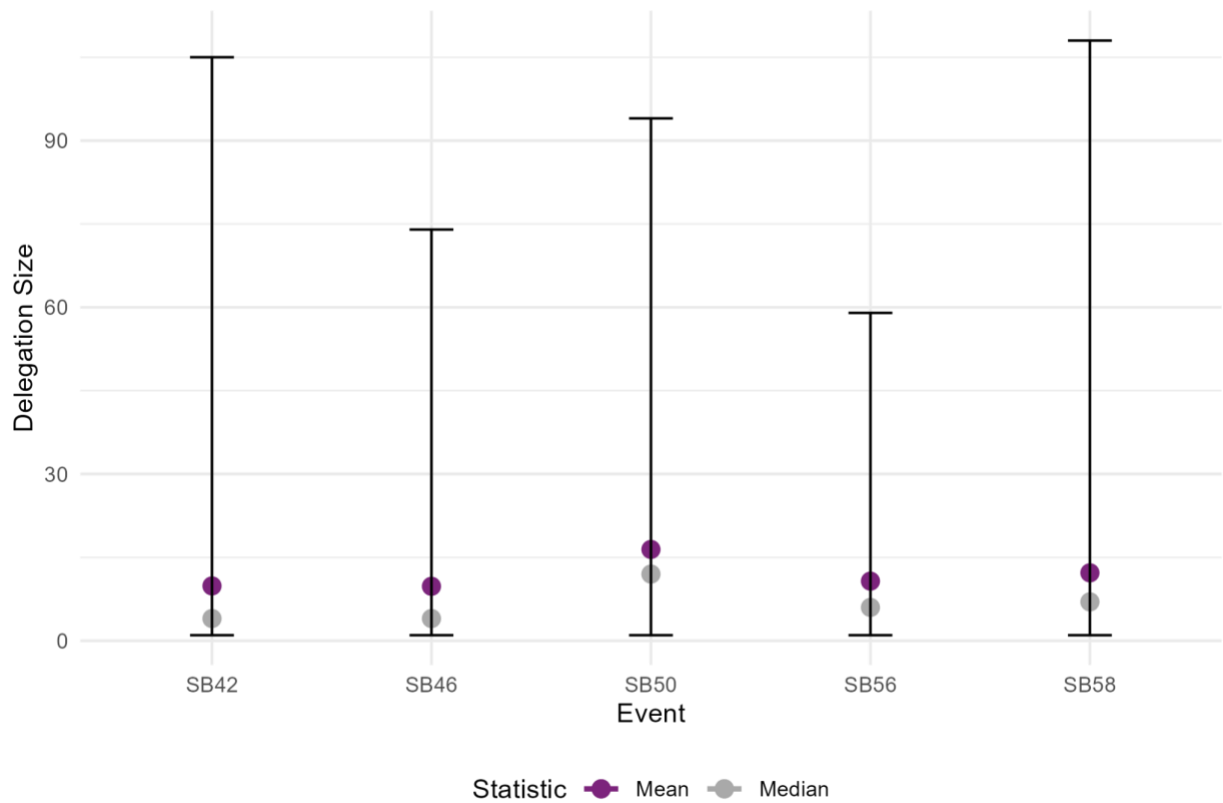


Figure 8. Distribution of SB Delegation Sizes Over Time (min./max. indicated by bars)

Another aspect highlighted by these figures is the large dispersion of delegation sizes. This is not a recent phenomenon. In all the COP and SB sessions we examined, the majority of participants was fielded by a relatively small number of delegations. For example, the largest 32 delegations at COP28 were responsible for more than half of the participants, with the largest 10 making up more than 25% of delegates. At COP21, these figures were almost identical (32 for >50%, 12 for >25%). Such ratios are also observed in the smaller SB meetings (at SB58, for example, corresponding delegation numbers were 30 for >50% and 10 for >25% of participants). However, the much smaller overall scope of SB meetings renders such relative discrepancies more manageable as the implications for absolute delegation size differences are less pronounced than at recent mega-COPs with tens of thousands of delegates.

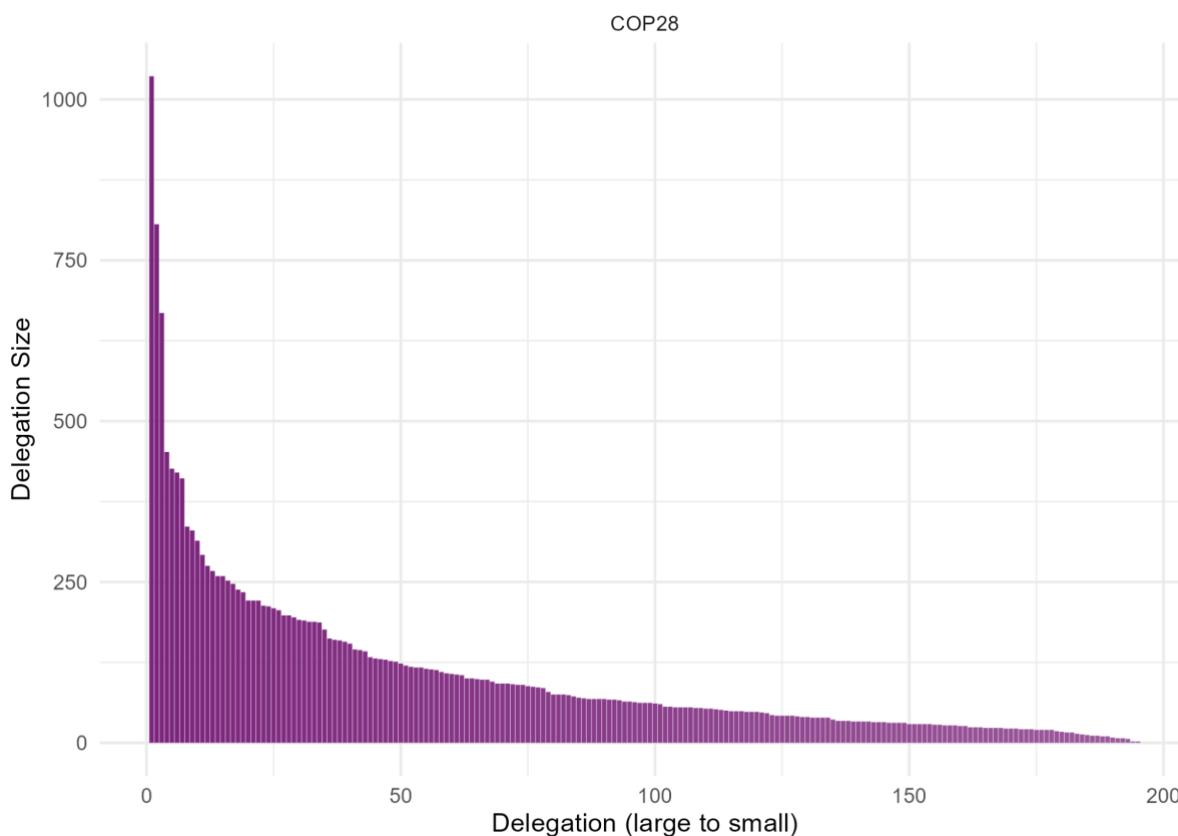


Figure 9. Distribution of Delegation Sizes at COP28

3.2. Drivers of Growing Delegation Sizes

A. Why the growth? It is not the workload

In our previous report (Müller et al. 2021), we already showed that the majority of the increase in delegation sizes cannot be attributed to increases in workload, as measured by the size of the meeting agenda or the number of parallel sessions. This analysis still applies because the size of the agendas has not fundamentally changed since our previous analysis (see also Figure 1 in UNFCCC Secretariat technical paper FCCC/TP/2024/5), but participant figures have continued to grow.

B. It is not the general level of involvement in the UNFCCC process at SBs

In principle, large delegations could also be due to a generally larger institutional commitment to the UNFCCC process, including larger participation in the mid-year SB meetings. While there is a positive

connection between these participant figures, comparing relative delegation sizes between COPs and the preceding SBs shows that some of the largest delegations also have the largest relative discrepancy in attendance figures. This means that they tended to be ‘underrepresented’ relative to average delegation size at the SBs, and, hence, substantially ‘overrepresented’ at the COP. In our sample, a typical delegation had about five times as many delegates for its COP delegation as for the preceding mid-year SB meetings. This ratio increases to an average of about 22 (and a median of 12) for large delegations with more than 150 delegates at a COP. In other words, much of the additional participation at COPs originates from Parties that do not clearly exhibit a higher involvement in all stages of the process.

C. ‘Yes, (Prime) Minister’ – the FOMO effect

At COP21, the average delegation size almost doubled whenever the head of state (President/ Prime Minister or equivalent) was present. This large add-on/multiplier effect persisted for subsequent COPs as well.

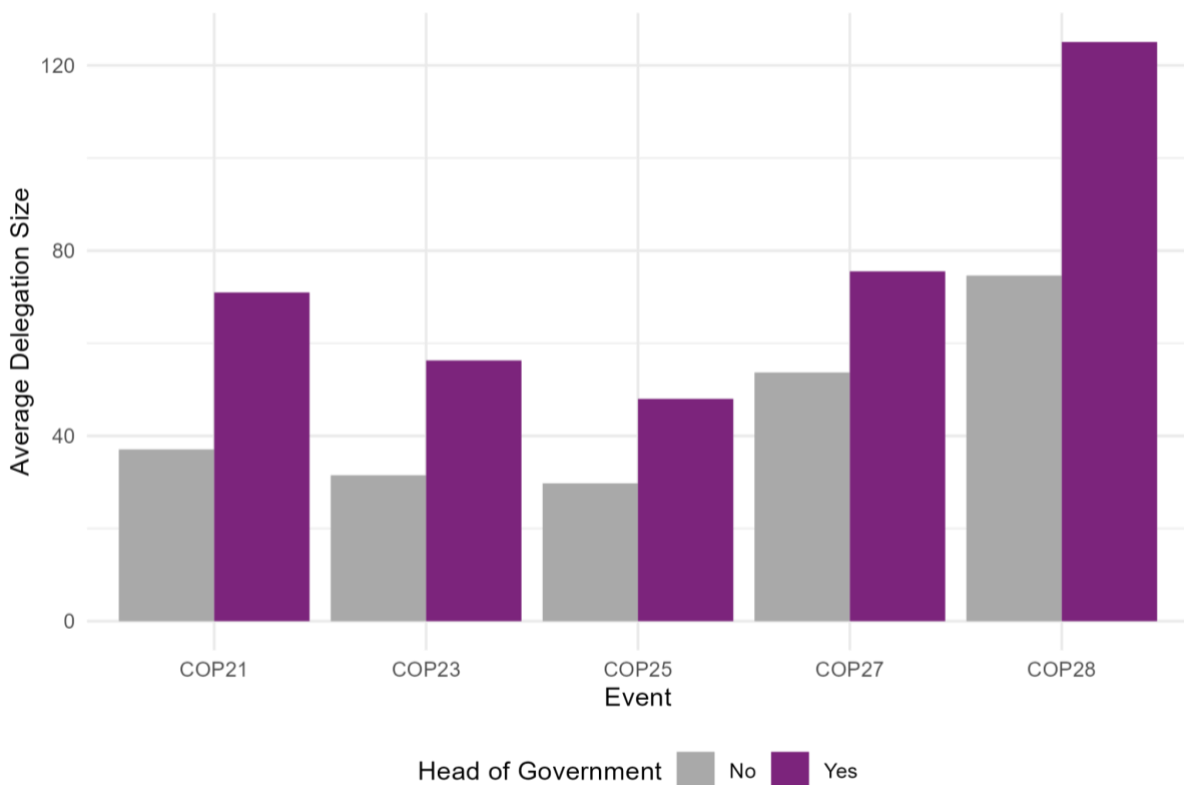


Figure 10. Average COP Delegation Size Depending on the Presence of a Head of State/Government

A similar picture results from an analysis of delegation sizes by the number of high-level participants (heads of state, ministers, ambassadors, royalty, etc.)⁷ – more officials have a disproportional impact on overall participant numbers for that Party.

⁷High-level status was inferred by a participant’s title. Generally speaking, anyone listed with ‘His/Her Excellency’ or equivalent in the title is classified as ‘high-level’. For the full details, see:

https://github.com/MatthiasRo/Quo_Vadis_COP_2024.

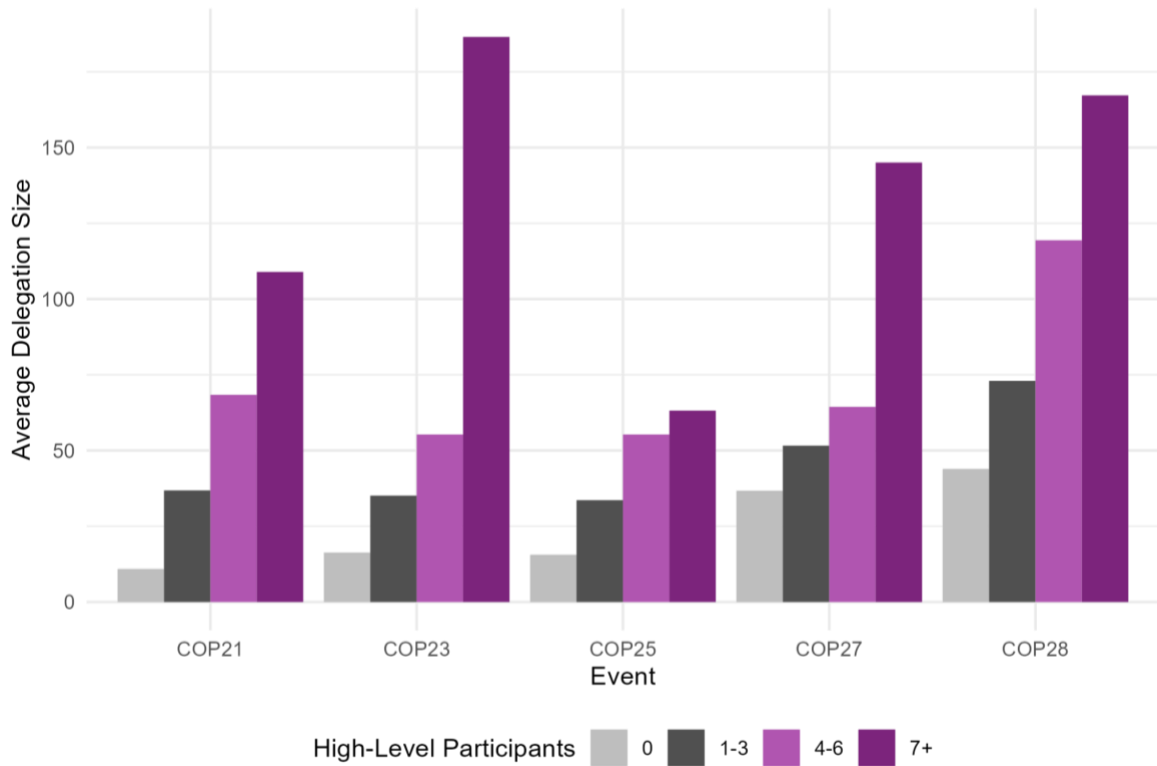


Figure 11. Average COP Delegation Size by the Number of High-Level Participants Over Time

Even for SBs, where senior/high-level participation is less common, we do see a broadly similar picture

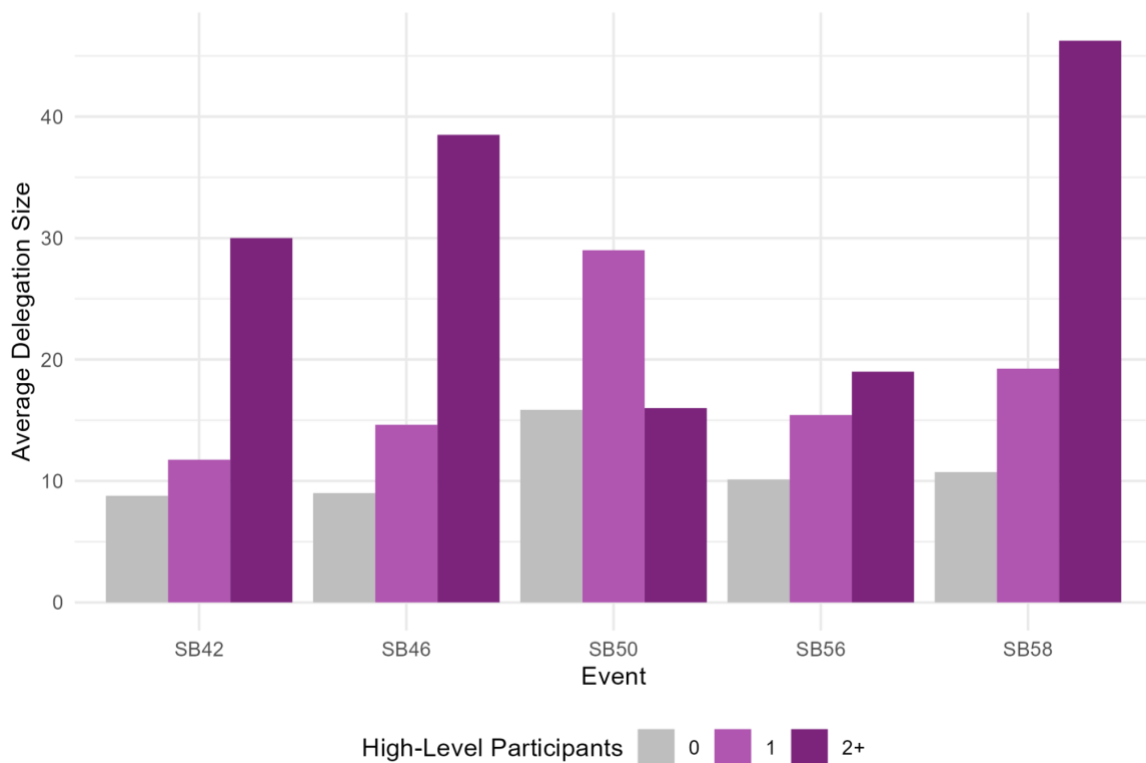


Figure 12. Average SB Delegation Size by the Number of High-Level Participants Over Time

Unsurprisingly, the presence of the head of state/government is also associated with higher participation among senior officials, suggesting a pyramid of ‘fear-of-missing-out’ (FOMO)-style participation patterns. To illustrate this relationship in our data, the figure below contains a typical delegation at COP28 with a head of state (with crown), some other high-level participants, and regular delegates.

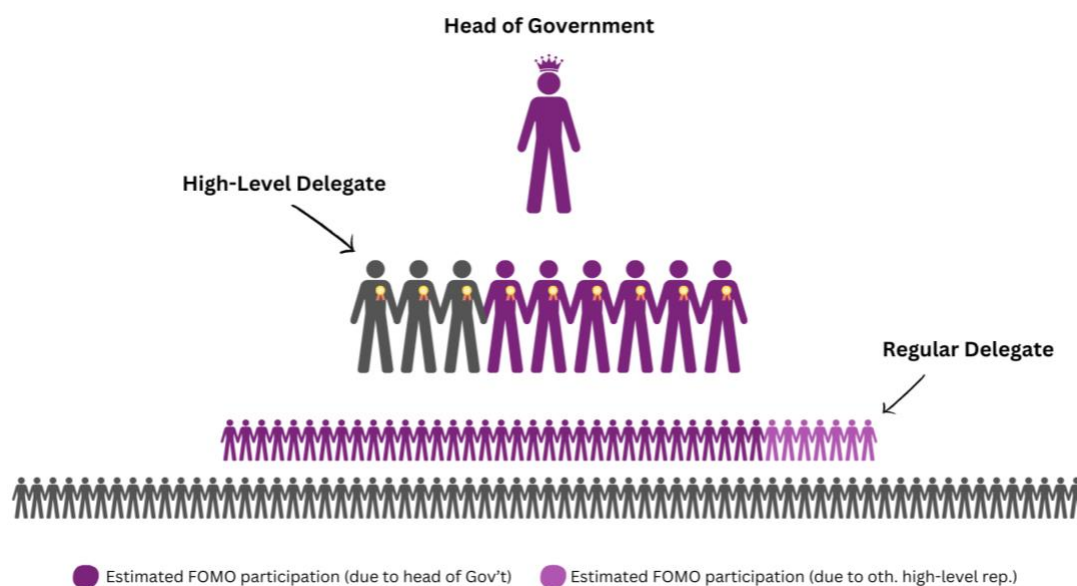


Figure 13. Estimated ‘Fear of Missing Out’ Participation Effects for an Average COP28 Delegation

According to our estimates, the presence of the head of government/state adds six additional high-level participants and a further 34 regular delegates, on average. On top of that, the presence of an increased number of high-level delegates is estimated to add a further seven additional regular delegates.⁸

While these numbers may vary across settings and should not be interpreted as laws of nature, they highlight the fact that the presence of a summit and corresponding high-level sessions can significantly boost delegation sizes through increased participation at all hierarchical levels. In present model calculations, the cascade of FOMO participation results in an additional 49 participants (excluding the head of government), or an increase of about two-thirds compared to the case without any participation at the highest level.

D. Number of ministries

Data from COP28/SB58 suggest that some countries managed to keep delegations small by confining their representation to a smaller number of core ministries (particularly foreign relations and environment). Large delegations tend to have a much wider variety of ministries represented, with average delegation sizes increasing sharply once more than half a dozen ministries were involved, as shown in the Figure 14 below. In such cases, the ministries’ links to the issues being negotiated are sometimes weak and/or can be more challenging to discern.

⁸ These values have been estimated based on simple linear regressions of COP28 participant figures on the presence of the head of state and the number of high-level delegates. They likely represent an upper bar to actual FOMO-type participation, as one may of course point out that, for example, additional presidential supporting staff as well as security/media personnel participates out of necessity rather than out of fear of missing out. Semantics aside, these factors do not challenge the observation that high-level participation comes at a significant delegation size premium.

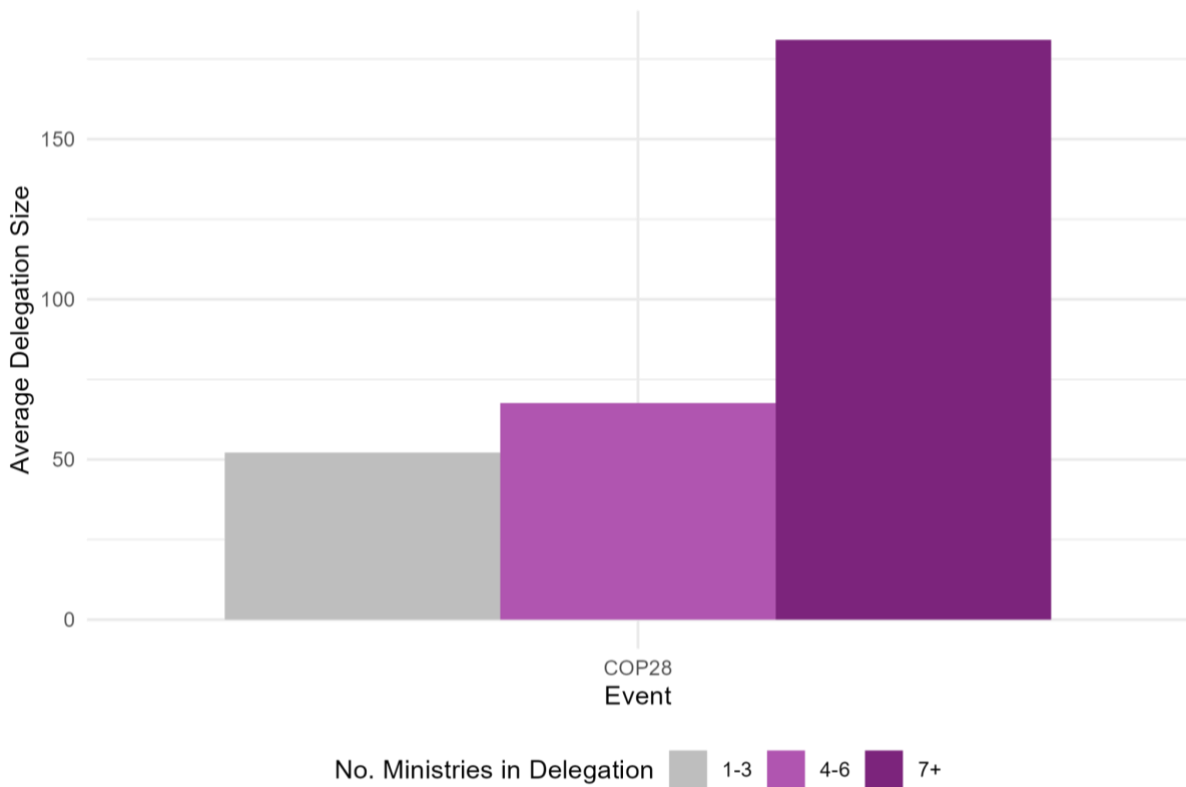


Figure 14. Average COP28 Delegation Size by the Number of Ministries Represented in the Delegation

E. Delegation overflow

So far, the analyses in the present section were based on the participants named in the final list of participants for the respective events. While covering the essential negotiators and high-level participants and officials making up the core of the delegations, these lists do not represent the entire attendance. In particular, delegations extend so-called ‘delegation overflow’ badges to further participant segments (which can include government staff, private sector representatives, NGO members, academics, students, etc.).

While unavailable for the earlier COPs in our sample, the list of overflow delegates was made public for COP28, which allowed us to include a few insights based on these figures. The overflow figures highlight two aspects.

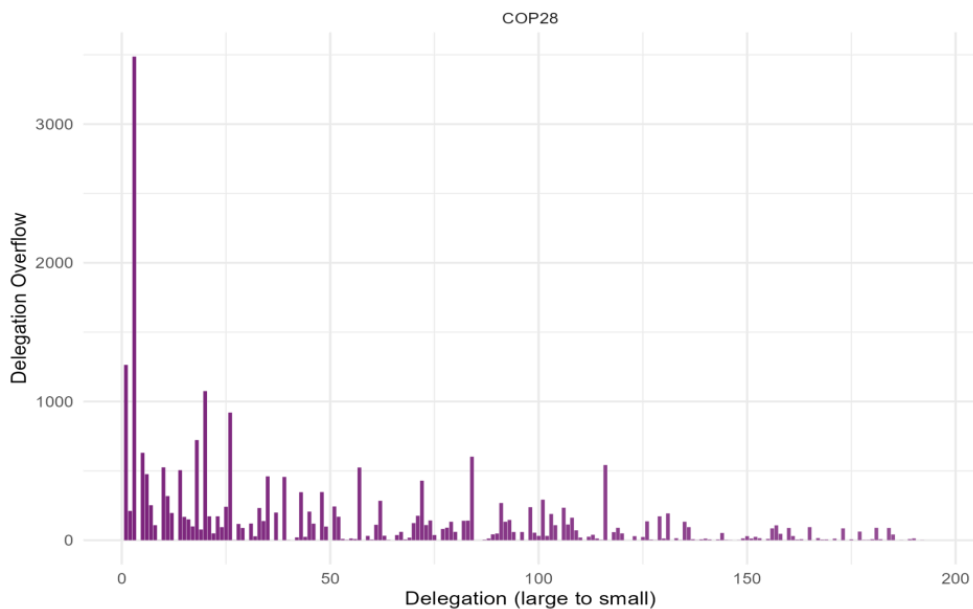


Figure 15. Number of Overflow Badges per Delegation, Ordered by Core Delegation Size

First, many delegations are not accompanied by a significant overflow contingent. Forty delegations did not have any overflow participants, and a further 35 had fewer than 10 in Dubai.

Second, overflow figures are much more concentrated than participant figures, with larger delegations being responsible for significantly higher overflow numbers. The 10 largest overflow delegations made up 43.2% of all COP28 overflow. These large variations again demonstrate that while some delegations distribute a large number of overflow badges, the overall picture suggests that such substantial delegation add-ons are not deemed a necessity by a large majority of Parties.

F. The ‘nostalgia’ component

Our analysis indicates that the delegation size at COP21, as well as the delegation size at the COP that preceded the event of interest, are very good predictors for subsequent COP delegation sizes.

Indeed, using a simple linear model, with COP21 and COP27 participation alone, we are able to explain about 56% of the variation in COP28 Party attendance, which is a substantial amount.⁹ Adding COP23 and COP25 participation figures increases this number by less than half of a percentage point, meaning they do not contribute to explaining participation once we account for other summit COPs. In other words, it isn’t just the case that some delegations are consistently a bit larger on average, while others tend to be smaller across the years. What our figures suggest is that some Parties send disproportionately large delegations to summit/treaty COPs, but do not replicate this behaviour at non-summit COPs.

In general, large delegations at COP21 scaled down for the non-treaty, non-summit COP23 and COP25, but then scaled up again for COP27, and substantially more for COP28. Overall, we see a certain level of inertia in delegation attendance (which is to be expected since, for most parties, it may be reasonably assumed that next year’s delegation does not fundamentally differ from this year’s detachment).

⁹For more details on the analysis, see the companion GitHub Repo at https://github.com/MatthiasRo/Quo_Vadis_COP_2024.



Figure 16. Paris (COP21) Casts a Long Shadow on Delegation Sizes
(Image Credit: DALL-E/OpenAI)

More interestingly, our analysis suggests that the recent summit COPs show more parallels to a treaty/summit COP than the other COP formats we have witnessed since the adoption of the Paris Agreement, given that the non-summit figures poorly predict subsequent summit attendance. In that sense, such summit ‘nostalgia’ dynamics may add another dimension to the understanding of the rise in COP participation figures in recent years.

3.3. Taking stock: the pull of high-level delegates and summit ‘nostalgia’

Overall, our analysis covered several candidates motivating large delegation sizes, which can be summarised as follows.

Workload and general involvement in the process are not key drivers of recent participation. The overall rise has been substantially stronger than any measure of actual negotiation workload at the conferences, as proxied by agenda sizes for example. Our analysis further showed that countries with very large COP delegations are not the ones driving participation in the wider UNFCCC nexus, in particular when we look at corresponding mid-year SB delegations.

High-level participation is a major driver of delegation size. In particular, we find that the presence of a head of government substantially adds to the delegation size through a cascade of ‘fear of missing out’ participation, where the presence of a president/prime minister is associated with a higher presence of other high-level staff, each with an additional following as well.

Very large delegations often have representatives from many ministries present, and smaller delegations tend to limit participation to a few key ministries. The presence of many ministries with no clear link to climate change-related negotiations may suggest room for size reduction without losing key personnel.

Extra ‘delegation overflow’ participation is driven by very few delegations. Judging by COP28 delegation information, a large majority of delegations do not see a need for a substantial ‘delegation overflow’ contingent.

The summit element of recent COPs has rendered them more similar to COP21 in Paris, with delegation sizes driven by what we term ‘summit nostalgia’. The historical Paris delegation size is more informative for COP28 participation than other recent non-summit COP (COP23/COP25) participation. Consistent with our findings on high-level participation, it appears that the summit element substantially contributes to the gigantic nature of recent COPs.

Based on our analysis, it appears unlikely that negotiations can be conducted with a concurrent high-level segment at a venue the size of Bonn. However, our findings suggest that the situation could be substantially different without the summit element and a similar pull for extensive high-level participation at the same time/location where the negotiations take place. For example, average delegation size for COP25 Parties without high-level participants was about the same as the average delegation size at the SB50 session that same year. Consequently, scaling down may not be quite the Herculean task that the most recent participant numbers suggest.