



Senior climate negotiators agree: Agreement on common time frames should be a priority for COP26

Although the Paris Agreement comes into effect in 2020, the issue of whether all countries will have a common time frame for the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) remains unresolved. It is one of three remaining elements of the Paris Agreement’s “rulebook” on which agreement was not possible either at the climate conference in Katowice in 2018, or in Madrid in 2019.

“We are coming to that point in time where we should and must settle the issue of common timeframes,” said Marianne Karlsen, Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI), in an opening address to the second webinar on common time frames organised by ecbi on 24 July 2020.

“A common timeframe will allow countries to come together at certain points to communicate something that is nationally determined, but done in the same rhythm. To get everyone into that common rhythm is key to enable the ambition mechanism for the Paris Agreement. So, in that way, a common timeframe is in fact a centrepiece of the Paris Agreement.”

The webinar was chaired by Kishan Kumarsingh, Lead Negotiator from Trinidad and Tobago and Co-chair of the ecbi Advisory Committee.

Karlsen noted that different options for the common time frame discussion have been explored since 2017, and Parties to the Paris Agreement have had a lot of time to elaborate on several technical options, which are clearly spelt out. Political maturity is now essential to resolve the issue, she said, since elements that relate to the discussion need to be settled at the political level – in national parliaments for example. “My mission and my aspiration as the SBI Chair is to settle this issue at COP26, along with the other missing pieces of the rulebook, to show the world that we are delivering on all aspects of the Paris Agreement,” she said.

Presenting a background, Benito Müller, ecbi Director, said paragraphs (§§) 23 and 24 of [Decision 1/CP.21](#) adopted in the Paris climate conference accommodate the different time frames chosen by countries in their intended NDCs (INDCs), which they had submitted before the Paris Agreement was adopted. In light of the fact that most countries chose a ten-year time frame, §24, which deals with ten-year time frames, will be applicable to most countries.

Most Parties will therefore have the two options laid out in §24: to either communicate their INDC as their NDC; or to update it before they communicate it.

At the same time, Article 4.9 of the Paris Agreement is clear: each Party will have to communicate an NDC every five years, even if they have a longer time horizon in their NDCs. So even if Parties have a ten-year time horizon in their NDCs, they will have to communicate something in 2025, taking into account the 2023 global stocktake. According to §24, they have two options: to communicate the next NDC, which presumably would be up to 2040 given the pattern; or to update the 2030 NDC.

If they choose the latter option, there will be no indication of their post-2030 plans when the 2028 global stocktake takes place. This creates a “cliff edge” situation which must be avoided for several reasons, including because domestic constituencies will need sufficient notice of future plans before implementation begins, to allow adequate time for planning. In 2030, §24 Parties will not have a choice – they will have to communicate their next NDC, up to 2040. The same pattern will then follow – with another cliff edge in 2040, and every ten years.

If Parties choose the former option and communicate their 2040 NDC in 2025, Müller said, we run the risk of locking in low ambition, based on longer-term projections. If countries are not comfortable with their capability to make these longer-term projections, they are likely to be more conservative in their NDCs, and err on the lower end of what they might be able to do.

Another problem, he said, is that Parties currently have no timetable when they are expected to update something which they have communicated earlier. This is a major drawback of the current rulebook. If Parties don't have the space and time to talk to each other about how much they are willing to do in the future, they will tend to assume that others are going to do as little as possible. So they will also be conservative. The process will not provide the enabling framework to discuss what they could do better, and improve what they have originally contributed.

Also, if countries have a longer-term horizon, they may be tempted to overshoot in the short-term, and think that they will be able to compensate later. This is a very risky strategy, Müller said, because in most cases, historically, it hasn't really worked. Shorter term targets are a better way of focusing minds.

Müller then proposed a way to overcome these issues, through a “Glasgow Ambition Cycle”, by requesting Parties to simply:

- communicate **by 2025** an NDC with a time frame up to **2035**, and to do so every five years thereafter; and
- consider **in 2025** updating their NDCs with a time frame up to **2030**, in line with Article 2.2 [on equity] and Article 4.3 [on progression] of the Paris Agreement, and to do so every five years thereafter.

In this way, Parties can have a longer-term horizon, but they simply have to re-visit it every five years, to consider if it is still the best they can do. Parties will have a synchronized updating cycle every five years. This will keep all the benefits of the longer-term planning but avoid its

shortcomings, without getting into the technicalities of five years, ten years, five plus five etc. Several groups of Parties had already indicated their support for a similar formulation.

Müller presented three case studies, related to the EU, China, and India.

He noted that the EU climate law has decided to put in place an EU-wide trajectory for net zero emissions by 2050, from 2030. The European Commission proposes that by September 2023 (just after, or at the time of the global stocktake) and every five years thereafter, they will assess the consistency of member state action and EU wide action with that trajectory. They will be empowered to issue recommendations to member states, and also review the adequacy of the trajectory itself. The law and this provision should make it quite simple for the EU to have their next NDC ending in 2035.

In India, he said, the national power sector strategy is also split into five-year targets – not just 5+5, but 5+5+5+5. It is a rolling process, which is updated and remodelled every five years. A five-year period is therefore clearly sufficient time to revisit what has happened and consider what can be done better, without losing face.

In China, the year 2035 is very important year, as it is midway between 2020 and 2050, when China is meant to become a modern socialist country. It should not be too difficult to convince the Chinese government that to have the next NDC ending in 2035.

Müller and Kumarsingh pointed participants to a [brief note](#) highlighting the importance of agreeing on such an Ambition Cycle and of political resolution of the issue of common time frames, prepared after the previous ecbi webinar on common time frames and supported by several webinar participants.

Kumarsingh said discussions like this can provide a technical understanding to facilitate that political decision-making that will be required at COP26. He also noted that the common time frames issue is linked to the other remaining issues of the Paris rulebook – the Article 6 cooperative mechanisms and transparency. He said agreement on all three issues will provide certainty at the domestic level of the road ahead, and Parties can proceed with domestic measures knowing fully well what other Parties will be doing over the same period.

He noted the 2023 and 2028 global stocktakes will be landmark political events – particularly in 2023, the world will be waiting for a signal on whether we are on track to addressing climate change, and any further delay in arriving at the decision on common timeframes beyond 2021 could erode the significance of the 2023 global stocktake. The time is ripe for decision making, as the technical negotiations have matured, and it is time to apprise ministers and political masters of how such a political resolution can be arrived in 2021. Resolving the issue will generate mutual confidence as countries know what others are doing.

Geert Fremout, negotiator for Belgium, then shared some reflections. He said the key issue to complete the Paris ambition mechanism is to fully enable Parties to be as ambitious as they can under the Paris Agreement. If agreement is not reached on common time frames and most Parties end up stuck in the §24 logic, it might be difficult to mobilise political momentum every five years to enhance ambition.

Presenting on the situation in the EU, Fremout said the EU has a 10-year NDC, partly because the existing domestic legislation, the National Energy and Climate plans, has a 10-year horizon. Currently, a discussion is underway on enhancing the ambition of the EU's 2030 NDC, and on the EU climate law, which will establish the framework for achieving climate neutrality by 2050. The Commission proposal described earlier by Müller includes a five-year assessment, and some member states are discussing a proposal to set five-year intermediary targets towards this 2050 objective. While this would better align the EU legislation with the proposal for the Glasgow Ambition Cycle, there are still many divergent views within the EU, and this should not be seen as the EU position.

R.R. Rashmi, former principal climate negotiator for India, said a five-year time frame is not a problem, as long as it is a part of overall political commitment, which could be 10 years or 15 years. These commitments are more important than targets, and the current scenario (with COVID-19) shows the necessity of taking into account the economic uncertainties that can affect countries. Setting a target in an uncertain environment will become more and more difficult – and will be challenging over the next two to three years. He said he was not sure that simply having symmetrical time periods will generate mutual confidence among Parties. He also did not see a strong basis for coming to agreement on common time frames soon because it was decided that they will apply from 2030 onwards, which is ten years away. The question is not that of advancing the target setting timeframe, but of confirming the political commitments through a process of review, he said. Rashmi also said that the achievement of the Indian national power sector was almost 17% less than what was promised in their 5+5+5+5 rolling plans.

In the discussion that followed, a developing country participant said that some countries get nervous about having overlapping NDCs, but that coexistence can happen, and is not necessarily a bad thing, as it could resolve the difference between those Parties that want a five year time frame and those that want a ten year time frame. As a way forward, he proposed identifying those countries or group of Parties whose legal systems may find this approach challenging, and working with them to find a solution. He expressed concern over the idea of having indicative targets, as opposed to firm targets, saying this brings to question the level of commitment implied in an NDC.

Müller said the Glasgow Ambition Cycle proposal does not call for an “indicative” NDC at all – all NDCs will have the same fixed nature, as long as they're not set in stone, and can be revisited after five years in good faith to try to do better.

A participant from the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC) agreed that the options for common time frames have already been on the table for a long time, and it is important to focus on giving the discussion the political maturity that it needs, perhaps by focusing on countries or groups that have more difficulties with this issue, to understand their concerns, and to think more in terms of a strategy than of technical options.

She said agreement on this issue was expected before starting the process of updating the NDCs, because it will be an important guiding element for the current processes that are now taking place at the national level. A decision was not possible at COP25, but it should be taken at COP26, and the risks of not doing so should be highlighted. Instead of focusing on the technical details, the

focus should now be on making political leaders aware of the implications of a common time frame on ambition, and the risks of not resolving the issue. The message will have to be simple rather than technical.

A participant from the Alliance of Small Island States said the idea of the Ambition Cycle needs to be “socialised” more, beyond the same circle; its importance should be highlighted to the incoming presidency during bilateral meetings at the political level; and the three remaining elements of the Paris rulebook should be viewed as a package for a successful conclusion in Glasgow.

A participant from the Environmental Integrity Group (EIG) said Müller’s presentation clearly showed the link between the common time frame issue and the global stocktake; and the importance of the common timeframe for reaching a maximum level of ambition of NDCs. She said sufficient time should be allotted to the issue of common time frames at COP26. At the same time, solutions at the political level should be sought.

An AILAC participant said the issue of a common time frame may seem esoteric, but is a key element of the broader enabling environment that makes the rest of the Paris Agreement work. This should be communicated to political level decision-makers.

A participant from the incoming COP26 Presidency agreed that the issue should be resolved as soon as possible.

Another AILAC participant said the webinar was useful to understand how this issue fits within the broader operation of the ambition mechanism, and is not just an isolated variable. She proposed ways of communicating this clearly as a collective, including in the form of a voluntary submission, to give momentum to this issue and ensure political backing.

In conclusion, Kumarsingh thanked participants, saying there seems to be agreement that this issue needs to be resolved at COP26. He urged them to discuss the issue within their constituencies, and to keep the momentum going forward.

Also read: *Ambition Cycle Agreement in Glasgow: If not, then what?*