



COP29 in Baku



"We need to question the purpose of climate conferences"

Even in the decisive phase, the climate negotiations in Baku are making little progress. Here, expert Benito Müller talks about reforming the summits and explains why Trump is an opportunity for Europe in terms of climate policy.

An interview by [Kurt Stukenberg](#) 18.11.2024, 17.19 hrs

SPIEGEL: Leading climate policy experts have just [sent](#) a letter [to](#) the [UN](#) criticizing the fact that the climate summit model in its current form is "no longer fit for purpose" - do you agree?

Müller: Absolutely

SPIEGEL: Why?

Müller: I warned some time ago that the current COPs (Conference of the Parties, climate conferences) are no longer really helping the negotiators to implement the [Paris Agreement](#). The summits are too big and raise excessive expectations. It's no longer about negotiating new major international agreements, which we've had since 2015. That's why these mega COPs are a source of disappointment. That doesn't help the cause, on the contrary. They are now a major reputational risk for the multilateral climate protection regime.

SPIEGEL: What would be gained if the summits were reduced in size?

Müller: The discussions become more intimate, there is simply a different atmosphere than when we come together with 60,000 people or more. At smaller events, you meet the negotiators in the corridor, at the coffee bar.

At the moment, delegates have to make appointments, informal meetings are hardly possible. A certain degree of intimacy and confidentiality is extremely important for the negotiations.

SPIEGEL: What else needs to happen?

Müller: For years, we have been experiencing a mixture of several things: at the COP negotiating sessions, the experts from the country delegations deal with the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement. At the same time, the heads of state and government arrive, give their speeches and use the venue for a political summit that is not wired into the actual negotiations. And there is a gigantic climate expo on the

COP grounds, where tens of thousands of representatives from NGOs, lobby groups and companies compete for

attention for their interests. We need to separate these three parts and let the negotiating teams do their work in peace, without the big circus surrounding them.

SPIEGEL: What would that look like in concrete terms?

Müller: Let's assume that [Germany](#) hosts the COP in two years' time. The real climate negotiations could then **take** place in [Bonn](#), where the UN Climate Secretariat is based. The German government could invite counterparts from all over the world to a major summit **in Berlin** sooner or later in the year. The Expo, if it is to be held, could take place in Frankfurt.

SPIEGEL: On the contrary, hasn't it always helped the climate conferences a lot that the heads of government arrive with their large teams at the beginning of the negotiations and provide the necessary momentum?

Müller: I doubt that. In my opinion, there are two reasons why top politicians come to the summits every year: The COP presidency gets a family photo with the heads of government from around the world and can show itself to be an important diplomatic player. The heads of government use the stage for messages to the local population in which they present themselves as climate protectors. Those heads of state who really need to be persuaded to do more, on the other hand, don't even show up. This show does nothing to advance international climate protection or local negotiations. We cannot simply carry on as before, but must question the purpose of the climate conferences.

SPIEGEL: How important are the COPs anyway?

Müller: As I said, they have their weaknesses, but we still need the negotiation formats because they are the only place where all countries in the world can sit together on an equal footing to tackle the huge problem of climate change. The advantage of the Paris process is that everyone sits at the table, not just the big, rich and powerful.

SPIEGEL: What would speak against shifting more responsibility to formats like the G20, where countries that can really make a difference come together?

Müller: If we left the issue to the big countries alone, the smaller ones would no longer have a chance to protect their interests. If the 20 most important industrialized and emerging countries wanted to become pioneers in climate protection, they would already have every opportunity to do so today. What's more, it's no longer just about reducing emissions; there are new issues: Climate financing for poor countries, for example. If they cede this to the G20, the weakest countries will have no voice and will come away empty-handed.

SPIEGEL: Does it make a difference which country leads the climate summit?

Müller: I'll put it this way, we wouldn't say as much about what Azerbaijan's President Aliyev called it,

"God's gift" of oil and gas if this summit were to take place in [Vanuatu](#). Of course, the respective presidents of the summits have an influence on which topics

more spotlight on the direction a summit outcome document takes. We should ensure that climate summits cannot only take place in petro-states and rich countries due to the costs involved.

SPIEGEL: There is even a proposal to exclude oil and gas states from the summits altogether.

Müller: That would be too radical for me.

SPIEGEL: Why?

Müller: If you start excluding countries, you are treading on very thin ice. We shouldn't do that; we also have to convince the fossil-fuel states that climate protection is in their own interests, and you can't achieve that by forbidding them to host climate summits.

SPIEGEL: How will Trump's election victory affect the climate negotiations in the coming years?

Müller: This is Europe's big moment. It has the chance to show itself to be the last great progressive force in climate protection. In the past, I often had the impression that there were reservations in Paris or Berlin about going too far ahead when a climate-friendly US government was in power, perhaps because they didn't want to be too far behind their partner in [Washington](#). Nobody has to show this kind of consideration now, so I can well imagine that the Europeans are now showing even more ambition than they would have done [if Kamala Harris](#) had won the election.

SPIEGEL: There will still be a huge gap in CO₂ savings.

Müller: I'm not so sure about that. A lot depends on the US states. Democratically governed [California](#) alone plays a huge role in the country's climate balance. And the energy transition has long since taken on an economic life of its own and is difficult to stop. All in all, the [USA](#)'s performance may not be as fundamentally different as it would have been under Kamala Harris. But perhaps I am being too optimistic.

SPIEGEL: Trump is unlikely to participate in international climate financing. Can other countries make up for this?

Müller: That depends on what we expect. The poorer countries are demanding payments of more than one trillion dollars a year in the future - this sum will not exist either way, with or without the USA, it is unrealistic that there will be intergovernmental transfers of this magnitude. Assuming we are talking about 200 or 300 billion a year in the long term, this would also be possible without the USA. Especially if you open up new sources of money, such as a special tax on flights, there are already [a number of ideas](#).

SPIEGEL: What will the COP in Baku bring?

Müller: My hope is that the multilateral negotiations will deliver what can be expected of them, namely decisions such as a new international climate financing target. No more, but also no less.