

United Nations climate conferences

The size of national delegations and the need for attendance regulation at climate conferences

With the growing significance of the United Nations climate conferences the number of attendees has grown considerably over the last years. But more participants do not necessarily ensure better decisions. And sometimes attending a United Nations climate conference is only a way to raise the profile of the attendee.

By Syed Mahbubur Rahman and Mokbul Morshed Ahmad

Every year the Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) brings together thousands of delegates from across the globe under one roof to discuss about global warming and climate change. To limit the attendance to these “Environmental Mega Conferences” (Seyfang 2003), the organizer since 2010 has restricted the observer organizations to nominate representatives.

However, despite this regulation the number of attendees has grown considerably (Schroeder/Lovell 2012). While the increase in participants demonstrates the growing significance of COPs among the scholars and policy makers, it should also be acknowledged that more participants do not necessarily ensure better decisions are efficiently made (Neeff 2013). Smart and timely decisions at COP would require a methodical composition of participants by giving preference to those with relevant knowledge and concern about climate change and sustainable development.

Though the purpose of the COPs might be to seek solutions to the issues of climate change, for some people and institutions, attending COPs is merely a way to raise their own profiles rather than to contribute their knowledge and expertise to addressing the issues (Schroeder/Lovell 2012).

Selecting the national delegation

Countries may differ in selecting the national delegation teams. Countries have varied and incompatible priorities that lead them to send certain types of professionals (Schroeder et al. 2012). For an instance, Brazil sends more from business associations, while Russia prefers to send more academics and researchers. The G8 countries have increased the number of delegates they send; in contrast, participation from small, developing countries has been in decline (Schroeder et al. 2012). Despite this trend, participants from few developing countries, for an instance Bangladesh, from 1995 to 2013 greatly increased, especially in COP15 and COP17. It has already been admitted that many of the climate vulnerable countries lack sufficient capacity to deal with actions against climate change. Does the gigantic size of national delegation from developing countries enhance capacity to deal with climate change?

Though some countries have successfully formulated climate change policies, initiated actions and ensured involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil societies, participation in COPs is not just problematic because of its limited or excess numbers but because of the infrequency or abun-

dance of attendance. It is not surprising to observe the same group of experts or same organizations repeatedly attending various sessions of COP.

Selection of individuals based on political considerations

Involvement of development organizations in the adaptation process is inevitable and it ranges from mere support for data collection aimed at research to hard-core action research. NGOs, along with the local individuals and organizations act as the pro-active agents who identify and immediately respond to the effects of climate change (Amaru/Chhetri 2013). Because of this, development organizations should get practical priority for greater learning and networking opportunities. For some countries, the proportion of experts from academia and research institutions as well as government officials have been declining and the proportion of political leaders (i. e. Member of the Parliament) has been increasing. In some cases, political leaders form around 20% of the national delegation. The official list of participants for various sessions shows some names of the delegates without any information on the affiliations. This phenomenon delivers, at least partly, the proof of incompetent selection of individuals based on political consideration or nepotism rather than adequacy for the agenda of the conferences.

Transparent selection of delegates

These trends raise a few concerns. Firstly, how far is it justified for those developing countries to constantly increase the number of delegates they send to COPs? Secondly, how the selection authorities' actions could be made more transparent and free of bureaucratic biasness? If participation does not provide constructive outcomes while consumes a lot of public fund, from own or from donors, the inclusion of ‘inappropriate’ political personalities needs to be con-

trolled to provide rooms for 'more suitable' experts from other sectors.

It is argued that the lack of capacity, resulted from lack of affordability and expertise, hinders poor countries' negotiation power and subsequently reduces effectiveness of their participation (Schroeder et al. 2012). Despite many other pressing problems, few developing countries send big group of delegates, often supported by the donors, to attend meetings in different countries. Hence, the level of negotiation and effectiveness of participation as a feedback from attendance in COPs needs to be tested. Favoritism and political consideration in selecting representatives for COPs may not reduce the capacity gap but can certainly reduce negotiation power.

Guidelines on the composition of delegations

Experts predicted that the 2015 Paris Climate Conference may attract 14,000 participants and may rise up to 28,000 (Neff 2013). However, a total of 36,276 participants, including media and observer organizations, have attended the COP21 in Paris – substantially higher than the earlier prediction. Based on the aforementioned challenges and assumed detrimental implications, the organizer, i. e. the UNFCCC may initiate guidelines on the composition to ensure a poised group of participants that would include experts from academia and research, private sector, NGOs and development organizations as well as government and civil societies from partaking countries. Unnecessary (or unfruitful) spending in any form, including attendance in environmental conferences, need to be conserved.

To do so, a competency-based questionnaire, incorporating requests related to the areas of expertise, for instance, length of experience and level of involvement with climate change and related activities may be introduced to assure insertion of apposite experts in the national delegation. Although several initiatives are in place, in some cases, injudicious resource consumption is hin-

dering achieving the goal of sustainable development. Smart policies and object-oriented actions only, involving the state and non-state actors, will help achieve this goal.

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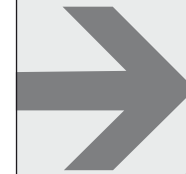
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