

Discussion Paper

The Politics of Global Climate Governance Reform

By Michael Weisberg and Giovanna Kuele

About the authors

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

International climate governance needs a rethink. Recent climate meetings revealed familiar frustrations: “The process is too slow,” “There is too much talk and not enough action,” and “It’s impossible to get nearly 200 countries to agree on anything beyond the lowest common denominator!”¹ Yet progress since the Paris Agreement and recent United Nations climate meetings should not be overlooked.

The consensus-building process is admittedly slow and often produces compromises that fall short of what the crisis demands. Moreover, United Nations negotiations are structured to keep delegates negotiating and have struggled to move from negotiation to implementation. But, alternative governance approaches are now emerging. Towards the end of his Group of 20 (G20) presidency and during his speech at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly this year, for instance, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva called on the international community to consider the creation of a United Nations Climate Council,² an authoritative body that would bring together diverse expertise from politics, academia, industry and civil society. Whether or not this proposal advances, the underlying point stands: the current United Nations Framework Convention on

Climate Change (UNFCCC) structure can only partially deliver the strong and coordinated response the climate crisis now requires.

To be effective, any new governance structure – or reform of an existing one – must perform three functions: deliver authoritative policy advice, coordinate action across diverse actors and anticipate risks to enable preemptive responses. The current system struggles with its existing mandates, let alone new ones.

This discussion paper explores three broad approaches to reform:

- 1. Modest or substantial reforms of the UNFCCC**
- 2. An “inside/outside” model that complements the existing system**
- 3. A new independent body or United Nations council**

It draws on our own thinking and builds on a 24 July 2025 workshop convened by UNU-CPR with the Governments of Brazil and Germany and the British Academy, “Reimagining Climate Governance: Reforms, Models, and Actions.”³

Reforming the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

For decades, reforming the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) process has been debated, including

streamlining agendas, altering the frequency of meetings, moving discussions online or adjusting participation.⁴

¹ Karl Mathiesen, “Climate conferences are dying. How to save the world now?”, POLITICO Europe, 25 November 2024. Available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/climate-conference-die-how-save-world-cop29/>.

² Speech by President Luiz Inácio Lula, Third Session of the G20 Leaders’ Meeting: Energy Transition and Sustainable Development”, Rio de Janeiro, 19 November 2024. Available at <https://www.gov.br/planalto/en/follow-the-government/speeches-statements/2024/11/speech-by-president-lula-at-the-3rd-session-of-the-g20-leaders-meeting-energy-transition-and-sustainable-development>.

³ United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, “Reimagining Climate Governance: Reforms, Models and Actions”, Workshop, 24 July 2025. Available at <https://unu.edu/cpr/event/reimagining-climate-governance-reforms-models-and-actions>.

⁴ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Note by the Secretariat: Approaches to and Opportunities for Increasing the Efficiency of the UNFCCC Process, including Visualization of Options for Streamlining the Agendas of the Governing and Subsidiary Bodies*, FCCC/SBI/2025/INF.6 (5 June 2025). Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/sbi2025_inf06.pdf.

One persistent proposal is to shift from consensus decision-making to United Nations General Assembly-style voting; which under UNFCCC Rule 42 requires an attempt at consensus followed by a two-thirds vote.⁵ Yet this rule has never been adopted and faces entrenched opposition. While the *threat* of voting might help COP presidents spur progress, there is little chance of consensus emerging to eliminate consensus itself.

A more feasible reform lies in restructuring the COP agenda. The “Climate COP” is effectively five simultaneous meetings: the UNFCCC COP, the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP), the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA), the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI). Roughly speaking, the SBSTA and SBI agendas take up the first week of Climate COP and the formal COP/CMP/CMA agendas take up the second week. If things go according to plan, the work of the SBSTA and SBI in November, as well as in their June meetings, sort out most of the technical details, leaving the final days of COP/CMA/CMP to focus on the most challenging issues that must be resolved at a political level. But, all of this is approximate and idealized and the reality is far messier and more complex.

Even if we remove the politics, which of course we can’t, there is a lot of additional overlap and duplications between mandates and within these five meetings, adding to the complexity. For instance, the SBSTA agenda item on Research and Systematic Observation duplicates Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) inputs and the Global Stocktake (GST).

Another question is whether all five bodies need to meet every year. The CMP, for example, could meet symbolically or only every five to ten years, since the

Kyoto Protocol’s commitment periods have ended and the Paris Agreement now frames global action. Similarly, SBSTA and SBI could meet only in June, with COP/CMA setting the agenda of the meeting in November.⁶ Though politically sensitive – especially as some countries consider withdrawing from the Paris Agreement – such consolidation could reduce duplication and ease the burden on small delegations.

More ambitious reforms target the Paris Agreement’s “ratchet mechanism”. Article 4.3 of the Paris Agreement requires each new Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to be more ambitious than the previous one.⁷ In theory, NDCs, National Adaptation Plans and Biennial Transparency Reports feed into the GST, generating peer pressure to course correct on the basis of technical information.⁸ The first GST showed, however, that even the assessment of progress from a technical perspective can be political. This is something that can be resolved if green house gas emissions and finance flows were assessed by independent third parties in an objective, mechanical way, including with the use of remote sensing. Adaptation is more complex, but here too, we could move toward a genuinely *technical* assessment phase done by independent experts, with the *negotiated* part focused solely on the response. Based on our experience with the IPCC, we know this will face resistance. But again, as part of a reform package that is balanced, it’s not impossible to imagine.

Though challenging, such reforms could gain traction as part of a grand bargain. Small delegations welcome streamlining but also fear losing space to highlight priorities. Balancing inclusiveness with efficiency will be key. Nonetheless, reforms to meeting agendas, mandates and the ratchet mechanism remain among the most realistic ways to strengthen the UNFCCC from within.

⁵ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Note by the Secretariat: Draft Rules of Procedure of the Conference of the Parties and its Subsidiary Bodies*, FCCC/CP/1996/2, 22 May 1996. Available at https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/02_0.pdf.

⁶ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, 10 December 1997 (United Nations publication, FCCC/CP/1997/Add.1).

⁷ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *The Paris Agreement*, 12 December 2015 (United Nations publication, 2015). The Paris Agreement entered into force 4 November 2016.

⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *Outcome of the first global stocktake*, Decision 1/CMA.5, Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement, Fifth Session, 13 December 2023. Available at <https://unfccc.int/topics/global-stocktake/about-the-global-stocktake/outcome-of-the-first-global-stocktake>.

The inside/outside model

A second approach is to create a structure outside of the UNFCCC that complements, rather than replaces, the formal system. In fact, when we first heard President Lula's speech at the G20, this is what we had envisioned, no doubt because of the proposal by the Maldives for a narrower arrangement along these lines for loss and damage.⁹ The so-called 'Loss and Damage Council', part of what Maldivian Minister Aminath Shauna called the "mosaic of solutions" to address loss and damage, would help ensure coordination, communication and coherence, and avoid, as much as possible, duplicated efforts. It was conceived as evaluating present and future needs for addressing loss and damage, ensuring stability against the backdrop of increasing climate impacts. And it was to accomplish this by convening the best thinkers on loss and damage alongside executives from the institutions charged with addressing loss and damage.

Although the Dubai COP 28 decision establishing a fund and funding arrangements for addressing loss and damage transformed the council into a high-level dialogue, the core concept remains valuable: convening the best thinkers and practitioners to address urgent needs in real time.^{10,11} This "inside/outside" model could

resemble a global inter-agency process: heads of institutions meeting quarterly or biannually under the United Nations Secretary-General's convening power. Beyond the meetings themselves, the model's value lies in forcing internal coordination across agencies. Unlike COP negotiations, this model would include United Nations agencies, private sector actors, technical experts and governments. Its broader membership would allow more rapid adaptation to emerging scientific, technological and geopolitical developments. It could also elevate under-represented issues (e.g., adaptation, migration and non-economic loss) and mobilize resources beyond what negotiations have achieved.

The main challenge is *linking* this external body to the formal COP/CMA process, since neither can bind the other. A workable solution, tested in the loss and damage case discussed above, is to ensure transparent information flow rather than coercive alignment. In this regard, an outside council could offer high-quality advice, build cross-sectoral linkages and identify emerging risks early enough for action. Its outputs could feed back into the UNFCCC, strengthening effectiveness without undermining legitimacy.

An Independent Commission or United Nations Council

A third option is to establish a genuinely independent commission or new United Nations Council. Critics

argue this would duplicate the UNFCCC, face political resistance and be unrealistic in today's multilateral

⁹ Fiona Harvey, "Rich countries must urgently help poor nations hit by climate crisis, says V20", *The Guardian*, 17 October 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/17/rich-countries-must-urgently-help-poor-nations-hit-by-climate-crisis-says-v20/>.

¹⁰ Michael Franczak and Michael Weisberg, "Addressing Loss and Damage through the Mosaic: A Simulation from the Delta Republic", International Peace Institute, October 2023. Available at https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2310_Addresssing-Loss-and-Damage-through-the-Mosaic.pdf.

¹¹ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "Fund for responding to Loss and Damage", n. d. Available at <https://unfccc.int/fund-for-responding-to-loss-and-damage>.

climate. Yet models from other fields show its potential. For example, President Obama's bioethics commissions¹² produced authoritative, interdisciplinary reports that guided policy without being legislative. Climate governance has seen ad hoc panels and champions, but their reports often lacked an institutional home. A permanent body reporting annually to the United Nations General Assembly, Member States and non-State actors could fill this gap.

Designing such a body requires a consideration of four key attributes: technical credibility, democratic legitimacy, responsiveness and legislative authority. No structure can maximize all four. Small groups with permanent seats may be fast and authoritative but lack legitimacy. Large universal bodies, such as the UNFCCC or General Assembly, are democratic but slow. The United Nations Security Council has binding power but is seen as unrepresentative. As Thomas Sowell observed, "there are no solutions, only tradeoffs". The real question is: what do we want a new body to do?

If the aim is to provide credible advice, link diverse actors and anticipate risks, legislative power may be less important than responsiveness and expertise. In that case, a commission with advisory – not negotiating – functions could add real value.

Model 1: High-Level Climate Commission

A high-level commission mandated by the COP Presidency, the COP itself or the United Nations General Assembly would ground its authority in international legitimacy. At the same time, it would retain the agility to act swiftly, draw on diverse expertise and provide credible, forward-looking advice.

A possible design is a High-Level Climate Commission (HLCC), managed jointly by the General Assembly and the COP Presidency troika. It would not negotiate but serve as an advisory and implementation platform. Roughly 30 commissioners could be selected for expertise and influence across climate science and policy (physical science, impacts, adaptation, mitigation pathways, finance, migration, biodiversity and health) with a balanced mix of ministerial-level officials, leading scientists, community and private sector leaders and youth representatives, nominated through a transparent process overseen by a joint secretariat.

The HLCC would have three primary functions:

- 1. Issue high-impact annual reports:** An annual *State of the Global Climate Response* report drawing on United Nations and IPCC products, published research and newly commissioned studies. These reports would spotlight emerging risks and under-addressed solutions, delivered to the COP, General Assembly and the G20, and be widely available to the public and media. Given that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), UNFCCC and the IPCC cannot themselves conduct or commission new science, and that the UNFCCC and IPCC face political barriers that slow down their outputs, the HLCC's commissioning role and ability to move quickly would be especially important.
- 2. Convene implementation forums:** Twice annually, convene United Nations agencies, multilateral development banks, business coalitions and civil society to coordinate on climate action. These forums would function as task forces, aligned with the COP agendas and GST cycles.
- 3. Maintain a standing secretariat and working groups:** A small, agile secretariat hosted by a university consortium or international organization, would support the HLCC and convene expert groups on pressing issues (e.g., global methane regulation, anticipatory humanitarian finance, climate attribution science for loss and damage). These groups could produce short policy briefs or technical notes in real time.

The HLCC would report annually to the COP and the General Assembly. While its findings would not be binding, the political weight of a respected and diverse commission could shape priorities and raise ambition. By decoupling implementation technical advice from negotiations, it could help to reduce politicization and speed responses.

The HLCC could operate on a five-year renewable mandate, linked to each GST.

Model 2: Global Climate and Nature Council

A second approach is to broaden governance beyond climate alone and establish a Global Climate and Nature

¹² Official website of the Presidential Commission for the Study of Bioethical Issues: <https://bioethicsarchive.georgetown.edu/pcsb/index.html>.

Council (GCNC). Proposed by the Igarapé Institute,¹³ this would integrate climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation into a single institutional framework. Unlike the “inside/outside” model, a GCNC would be a standing body with political and technical authority, designed to overcome fragmentation across multilateral processes.

It would serve seven core functions:

- 1. Unify and integrate:** Link climate, biodiversity, land degradation and sustainable development under one umbrella, reducing silos.
- 2. Political leadership:** Maintain momentum between summits, similar to the United Nations General Assembly.
- 3. Foster Coordination:** Align the calendars and outputs of diverse forums (UNFCCC, CBD, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), G20, international financial institutions, regional bodies).
- 4. Multistakeholder engagement:** Give youth, Indigenous peoples, civil society, trade unions and business a formal and meaningful role.
- 5. Support implementation:** Provide tools and monitoring mechanisms, modelled on the Human Rights Council’s review process.
- 6. Rationalize resources:** Coordinate across funds (Global Biodiversity Framework Fund, Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund), provided that access to finance for the developing world remains a core principle, while helping unlock new flows, including debt relief and multilateral development bank reform.
- 7. Enable evolution and innovation:** Address emerging issues (e.g. intersection with peace and security, human rights, trade and sustainable development) while using new tools such as AI scenario modelling.

In design, a GCNC could adopt universal membership for legitimacy or a smaller elected membership for

responsiveness. Ideally, it would also ensure strong credibility on finance, enabling long-term predictability for investment and mobilizing private capital alongside public flows. By consolidating fragmented regimes and anchoring them in one flexible institution, a GCNC would go further than UNFCCC reform, the inside/outside model or the HLCC. Yet, its ambition guarantees political headwinds, making it a more challenging, though potentially transformative, pathway.

Model 3: Mechanism for forming an Independent Commission or United Nations Council

Whether the model is an HLCC, a GCNC or another type of independent body, the practical question is how it could be created. Though often portrayed as daunting, the challenge is less about feasibility than political will. The same States that participate in the UNFCCC, General Assembly and United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) already have the authority to establish such institutions.

Several pathways exist:

- 1. COP/CMA initiative:** The COP or CMA could adopt a decision inviting the General Assembly or Secretary-General to establish a body. This would anchor the process in the climate regime while signaling a broader need for institutional innovation.
- 2. UN80 initiative:** Ongoing reviews of United Nations institutions could expand UNEP’s authority to support the Rio Conventions and elevate the UNEA as the main intergovernmental forum for climate and nature – potentially upgrading it into a principal United Nations organ.^{14,15}
- 3. Joint Rio Convention decision:** The UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD COPs could jointly establish an HLCC or GCNC, reflecting the interconnectedness of climate change, biodiversity loss and land degradation.

¹³ Igarapé Institute, “Towards a Global Climate and Nature Council: underpinning the global *mutirão* and modelling the future of governance”, Global Futures Bulletin, September 2025.

¹⁴ United Nations, “At 80, what might UN reform look like?”, UN News, 17 June 2025. Available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164836>.

¹⁵ Igarapé Institute, “High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB)”, Instituto Igarapé. Available at <https://igarape.org.br/en/issues/international-cooperation/hlab/>.

4. Subsidiary Body of the United Nations General Assembly or ECOSOC: Creating a United Nations climate change council under either forum through a resolution would avoid the need for a Charter amendment. The General Assembly provides

universal legitimacy, while ECOSOC offers flexibility and space for innovation. Either path could allow the council to prove its value and eventually be elevated.¹⁶

Conclusion

The debate on reforming global climate governance reflects both frustration with the status quo and recognition that no single model can resolve every challenge. The UNFCCC has been indispensable in building a global framework for climate action, yet its consensus-based processes and overlapping structures often slow progress. Proposals to streamline agendas, rationalize subsidiary bodies and strengthen the Paris Agreement's ratchet mechanism offer pragmatic ways to enhance effectiveness from within.

Beyond internal reform, the "inside/outside" model demonstrates how external structures can supplement negotiations with coordination, expertise and early-warning functions. Similarly, independent commissions or councils – whether focused narrowly on climate or broadly on climate and nature – could provide high-level advice, convene diverse stakeholders and help align

fragmented regimes. Each option involves trade-offs between legitimacy, technical authority, responsiveness and political feasibility.

The pathways to establishing new bodies are many, from COP or CMA initiatives to broader United Nations reforms. The real test lies not in institutional design but in generating political will. Experience shows that well-crafted reforms, even if incremental, could gain traction when they reduce duplication, empower small delegations and deliver tangible benefits.

Ultimately, global climate governance must evolve beyond endless negotiations toward implementation and accountability. Whether through UNFCCC reforms, complementary structures or new institutions, the task is to build structures capable of responding rapidly and credibly to the defining crisis of our time.

¹⁶ Igarapé Institute, "Towards a Global Climate and Nature Council: underpinning the global *mutirão* and modelling the future of governance".

About GGI

The Global Governance Innovation Platform helps UN Member States design new multilateral institutions and reform existing ones. Through interactive mapping and data visualization, we identify and showcase innovative governance models and mechanisms that can be adapted to address urgent global challenges and collective action problems.

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