



# The fragmentation of international climate politics

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# The fragmentation of international climate politics

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Over the last decades, there has been a rapid increase of the number of climate change initiatives outside the UNFCCC. In research this is referred to as ‘institutional fragmentation’, and it encompasses a wide range of public, private and hybrid initiatives, at various levels of governance. This development is extensively discussed in the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report AR5. Chapters 13-16 of the Working Group III contribution to the AR5 highlight that institutional fragmentation has meanwhile drawn more attention in UNFCCC-internal discussions. The changing climate policy arena raises new issues and may offer new opportunities to advance climate change mitigation and adaptation.

## From the only game in town to institutional fragmentation

From the late 1980s up to the early 2000s, the United Nations (UN) process in global climate governance held the centre stage, uncontested, with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as the embodiment. Under the UNFCCC, countries met in yearly negotiation sessions, and, among other developments, wrote the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 as the first ever legally binding international agreement on climate change mitigation. Since then, new arenas have emerged, on which countries, international organisations, corporations and local governments come together.

In the 2000s other multilateral environmental agreements, e.g. on biological diversity (Convention of Biological Diversity) and ozone layer depletion (the Montreal Protocol), started to increasingly address climate-related issues falling within their mandates. The curbing of gases such as CFCs under the auspices of the Montreal Protocol has, for example, probably until now provided for more mitigation of climate change than what has been achieved under the Kyoto Protocol. Geoengineering has been addressed under the Convention of Biological Diversity, but not the UNFCCC. The same goes for a range of non-environmental international organizations, e.g. the involvement of the World Bank and multilateral development banks in climate investment and finance and of

the World Trade Organization, e.g. on intellectual property rights and tariffs and non-tariff barriers.

In addition, different forms of regional cooperation between countries as well as high-level, club-like forums have come to address climate concerns. The latter include various Group of 8 (G8) and the Group of 20 (G20) summits and the Major Economies Forum.

Yet other governance arrangements of multi-stakeholder partnerships on specific technologies have come about, involving governments, corporations and/or non-governmental organizations). They include, for instance, the Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum, the Global Methane Initiative, the (now-defunct) Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (APP), the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP), Friends of Fossil Fuel Subsidy Reform, and the Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC).

Another category consists of the wide variety of regulated and voluntary markets that have been established before and (especially) after the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol. These include large regulatory (or compliance) markets such as the EU ETS, but also voluntary carbon markets. This has in turn led to new arrangements that seek to govern these markets,



e.g. the Voluntary Carbon Standard and the Gold Standard. Yet other transnational governance efforts hold corporations to account for their carbon footprints, either through self-regulation (e.g. the Carbon Disclosure Project) or through scrutiny by civil society organizations.

Finally, numerous sub-national efforts have been launched. For example, several US states have become engaged in emissions trading systems, e.g. the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI). Other initiatives have involved cities and municipal governments. In addition to stand-alone initiatives at the local level, some of these are transnational networks through which urban actors cooperate on climate change issues, e.g. the Cities for Climate Protection program.

#### Fragmentation matters

There are several cross-cutting or comparative aspects to these developments. These include varying degrees of legal bindingness and centralization and the occurrence of design elements like equitable methods for effort-sharing.

Moreover, linkages between the UNFCCC, the WTO, subnational and regional arrangements create co-benefits, but may also entail coordination and legitimacy gaps. Adaptation to climate change is a relatively neglected topic in the new institutions. It is not clear which actors benefit from

the growing complexity and which ones are disadvantaged or excluded, nor how rulemaking in one forum affects the norms in another, or how fragmentation affects implementation on the ground.

#### Navigating complexity

It is an interesting question how these developments continue. Can or should the role of the UNFCCC be redefined in light of the increasing fragmentation? Can the function as a top-down institution for implementing climate policies. There is a potential role for it in facilitating and coordinating the wide variety of bottom-up approaches which are developing. One possible development is the UNFCCC acting as an 'orchestrator' of various initiatives, e.g. on emissions trading, technology initiatives or private sector funding, including monitoring, reporting and verification, enforcement, and benchmarking for the numerous climate change measures implemented across the globe. At the same time, it is not given that the sum of bottom-up activities would add up to what is needed to limit global warming in accordance to some set target, such as the two-degree goal. A more diversified climate governance is nevertheless developing, which in itself may reflect the growing recognition of the climate change issue and how it permeates most aspects of the modern society and its concerns.



**WHAT IS THE QUESTION?**

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*Photo Fariborz Zelli:  
German Development Institute*

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