POLICY BRIEF

From Negotiations to Delivery

Rethinking International Climate Governance

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GERMANWATCH

Imprint

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Key messages

The Paris framework has achieved substantial progress, but implementation remains far too slow. The international climate regime has created a universal framework and shifted political and economic expectations globally, though current policies and commitments do not adequately meet the Paris Agreement's goals.

Two-tiered (institutional and implementation) climate multilateralism is emerging as the most realistic path forward. This system can combine universal multilateralism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as an institutional tier, with more flexible implementation-focused fora and alliances as an implementation tier.

In the institutional tier, the UNFCCC ecosystem must evolve from negotiations toward delivery. With most Paris Agreement rules already in place, the key challenge is raising ambition, accelerating implementation and ensuring accountability and is no longer agreeing on frameworks.

In the implementation tier, a complementary layer of climate cooperation should be advanced and strengthened. This layer should enable faster, more flexible, and more targeted implementation and support raising ambition. This second tier does not replace the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement; rather, it operationalises it and is part of its implementation. The Global Climate Action Agenda, frontrunner alliances, and bilateral/multilateral partnerships are the core components.

Future COPs should evolve from negotiation-heavy conferences into a global ambition, implementation, accountability and mobilisation space. The COP would act as a nerve centre for the broader climate ecosystem. Organized in a blue, turquoise and green zone it would provide a forum to connect actors, increase ambition, and accelerate implementation, while maintaining a shared direction under the Paris Agreement. Climate governance's success increasingly would be measured by emissions reductions, resilience outcomes, fossil-fuel phase down, finance mobilised, and real-world acceleration of transformation, rather than by negotiated text.

Recommendations for the German government

1. Shift German and EU climate diplomacy from negotiation-centred to delivery-centred engagement
2. Invest strategically in 'frontrunner alliances' and sectoral climate alliances
3. Foster bilateral/multilateral climate, energy, and development partnerships
4. Actively support incremental UNFCCC reform while defending multilateralism
5. Lead the transformation through credible domestic action

1 Introduction

We live in a time of profound uncertainty, with multiple, overlapping crises and transformations. Geopolitical tensions are heightening, economic systems are being reconfigured, societies are becoming more polarised, and technological change is accelerating at an unprecedented rate. Amid these dynamics, the climate crisis remains a defining challenge, and one of the gravest existential threats, of the 21st century. Sustained and effective international cooperation is imperative and indispensable for addressing this crisis.

International climate policy is entering a decisive period. While the Paris Agreement established a universal framework for collective action, a gap persists between what is scientifically necessary to limit global warming and what is politically feasible in today's world. The repeated efforts of several major fossil-fuel-producing and exporting states to prolong the fossil fuel business model have, since early 2025, called collective action into question far more fundamentally than before. Geopolitical rivalries, economic constraints, and institutional limitations continue to impede climate policy implementation, even as climate impacts intensify.

Our objective with this paper is to show how international climate policy must evolve to deliver action at the necessary speed and scale, while maintaining legitimacy, inclusiveness, fairness, and climate justice. We seek to offer a forward-looking governance architecture that builds on existing institutions, especially the UNFCCC, while complementing them with reinforcing formats.

Using the terminology of COP30 President André Corrêa do Lago,[1] we argue that the future of international climate policy lies in a two-tiered (institutional and implementation) governance architecture combining universal multilateralism with the effectiveness of more flexible and action-oriented cooperation formats.

Along with the two-tiered approach, we outline key reform needs within the multilateral system, and we highlight political and institutional pathways to raise ambition and accelerate implementation. In doing so, we invite reflection on ways to effectively reconcile universality and to move from negotiated ambition to tangible transformation in the coming years, despite the existing geopolitical fragmentation. Our approach is not intended to be a fixed blueprint, but rather to serve as a discussion starter on how international climate policy can evolve to close the widening gap between the scientifically necessary and the politically feasible. Political agency, institutional innovation, and strategic alignment across multiple levels of governance are necessary for moving from concept to practice.

[1] Building on the two-tiered approach suggested by COP30 President do Lago. See COP30 Presidency 2026.

2 Current status of international climate policy

Substantial progress through multilateral climate cooperation

International climate cooperation has produced a remarkable institutional architecture over the past few decades. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement form the political, legal, and normative foundations of global climate governance. The Paris Agreement has established a universal framework agreed upon by 195 countries, and it has generated political momentum with remarkable success. The system has delivered tangible progress, as the Agreement has set governments, markets, and investors in motion.[2] Projections in 2015 suggested a global temperature increase of up to 3.9°C by the end of the century; however, current United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates now see a trajectory closer to 2.8°C.[3] This outcome demonstrates the real, albeit insufficient, impact of collective climate action under the Paris framework. The Club of Rome summarises: 'Despite some of its flaws, and limited resources, the global policy framework is scientifically rigorous and economically sound and complete. But the framework alone is not enough to solve the problems.'[4]

Despite progress, the world is not yet on track

At the same time, the world is not on track to meet the Paris goals. Nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and national adaptation plans (NAPs) still lack necessary ambition, and there are persistent and substantial gaps between political commitments, implemented policies, and actual emission trajectories.[5] Land and sea surface temperatures have repeatedly hit record highs, making it now extremely unlikely that the 1.5°C limit can be upheld without a temporary overshoot.[6] Climate change is no longer a future risk. While it is growing, it is already shaping the lives of millions of people worldwide. It threatens fundamental human rights, undermines economic stability, exacerbates inequality, and increasingly acts as a security threat multiplier in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. There is also a growing risk of crossing critical tipping points in the Earth system, which could trigger catastrophic and cascading effects and intensify climate change even further.[7]

Many Parties are not fulfilling their formal Paris obligations; for instance, 57 did not submit an NDC 3.0[8] and a substantial amount didn't honour their reporting obligations. This negligence results in a fundamental tension at the heart of international climate policy – a widening gap between the scientifically necessary and the politically feasible.

[2] For an overview of the progress see: Schäfer and Bals 2025; Bals and Hierl 2025.
[3] UNEP 2025 – We must note that the UNEP projections have remained virtually unchanged since 2021, meaning that the past five years have seen stagnation rather than progress.
[4] Club of Rome 2024.
[5] See results of the Global Stocktake in 2023 (UNFCCC 2024).
[6] Uhlich et al. 2025.
[7] Some of these thresholds are no longer hypothetical. The first systemic tipping point may already have been crossed, as tropical warm-water coral reef systems – which are vital for marine biodiversity, coastal protection, and the livelihoods of millions – are experiencing widespread and effectively irreversible decline on a global scale.
[8] Climate Action Tracker 2026.

Five key challenges for international climate policy

Several interrelated challenges are expanding this gap. The following five are pivotal.

First is the need for international climate policy to move from negotiation to delivery. Ten years after the Paris Agreement was adopted the UNFCCC process stands at a turning point. With almost all Paris elements now negotiated and the policy cycle fully operational, the regime's 'normative architecture is largely in place.'[9] The focus must now shift from rule setting to delivery – including raising ambition, accelerating implementation and ensuring accountability. The existing international climate policy framework has yet to be sufficiently adapted to the climate crisis' urgency and complexity. Most notably, the path from rule setting to review to actual implementation remains incomplete. This structural weakness was abundantly clear at COP30. Despite notable diplomatic and technical progress, especially given the challenging geopolitical environment, the outcomes fell short of what climate science requires and what those already experiencing severe climate impacts demand.

Second is the persistent influence of fossil fuel interests and the political backlash against climate action. The transformation that the Paris Agreement initiated directly challenges entrenched economic structures and vested interests. Countries, corporations, and other powerful actors that benefit from fossil fuel extraction and use are actively working to delay or dilute ambitious climate action.[10] These parties' influence is visible within and beyond the UNFCCC process and is seen in lobbying, agenda setting, and the weakening of negotiation outcomes.[11] Such actions and effects slow progress and undermine the system's credibility and perceived fairness. Inertia is no longer the issue; we now see growing political and economic backlash. Recent developments, including US withdrawal from taking part, and the resulting funding uncertainties, are accelerating this pushback, which is increasingly shaping global dynamics and spilling over into other regions.

The third challenge is the resurgence of geopolitical rivalry and the competition of petrostates vs electrostates. International climate cooperation increasingly works in a context shaped by strategic competition among major powers, particularly the United States, China, the European Union (EU), Russia and India. Competition between so-called petrostates and electrostates increasingly defines the global political economy.[12] Climate policy, therefore, has become inseparable from questions of industrial competitiveness, economic security, and technological sovereignty. China recognised this shift early on and invested strategically across the entire clean technology value chain, thereby establishing a dominant position in many key green industries. The EU, however, has struggled to define a coherent strategic response. While the EU continues to present itself as a normative leader in climate diplomacy, its industrial and geopolitical positioning remains ambiguous and fragmented. Current European measures do not adequately match the scale and speed of global green industrial competition. The EU already has lost a substantial share of technological and manufacturing leadership to China in several green technology sectors.

Broader geopolitical interests, in this environment, often eclipse climate policy. Cooperative principles such as 'common but differentiated responsibilities,' are being reinterpreted

[9] COP30 Presidency 2026.
[10] See e.g. Roberts et al. 2025; Green 2026.
[11] For COP29, more than 1,700 oil, gas and coal lobbyists were granted access, according to *The Guardian*.
[12] See e.g. Gilman 2026.

through the lens of national advantage, industrial policy, and technological leadership. This tendency reduces key actors' willingness to compromise, and it constrains the scope for ambitious multilateral outcomes. Taken further, some countries, such the US, are completely ignoring the agreed to principles and are leaving agreements in order to pursue destructive fossil fuel agendas.

Persistent structural inequalities and post- and neo-colonial dynamics present a fourth challenge. Deep-rooted disparities between the Global North and Global South continue to shape climate negotiations.[13] Many developing countries rightly point to the historical responsibility of industrialised nations, whose wealth has been built on resource extraction and fossil fuel use. At the same time, particularly vulnerable countries face pressing development needs and limited fiscal space. Wealthier nations' reluctance to fully acknowledge these asymmetries – and translate them into adequate mitigation efforts, financial support, and policy space – remains a central barrier to trust and cooperation.[14]

Fifth among the pivotal challenges is insufficient climate finance and the erosion of trust. Adequate and predictable financial support for mitigation, adaptation, and addressing loss and damage is a cornerstone of international climate cooperation. However, developed countries' commitments have repeatedly lacked scale, reliability, and impact.[15] These shortcomings undermine trust, weaken cooperation, and limit developing countries' ability to invest in the energy transformation, adaptation, and addressing of loss and damage. Broader political agreements risk losing legitimacy and effectiveness without credible progress on finance.

3 Two-tiered climate multilateralism is a way forward

Achieving the Paris Agreement's goals is not optional or a luxury – it is imperative. Moreover, the 2025 litigation milestones, including landmark court rulings and advisory opinions, specify that international law contains tangible legal duties and is not merely a set of moral imperatives.[16]

International climate policy must evolve beyond assuming effective action requires continuous international consensus at every implementation stage. That consensus was, in fact, already achieved when the Paris Agreement was negotiated and entered into force. Paris is a universal, legally binding agreement under international law to limit global warming, strengthen climate resilience and adaptation, and align global financial flows with low-emission and climate-resilient development. It also includes a mechanism to raise ambition over time. It legally commits all Parties to pursue climate action with the 'highest possible ambition,'[17] considering common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC). Additionally, the 2023 Dubai Consensus decided on a 'transition away from fossil fuels,' alongside commitments to triple renewable energy capacity and

[13] See e.g. Ciplet et al. 2015.

[14] See e.g. Civil Society Equity Review 2025.

[15] See e.g. Kowalzig et al. 2025.

[16] Klein and Schäfer 2025.

[17] Paris Article 4.3: 'Each Party's successive nationally determined contribution will represent a progression beyond the Party's then current nationally determined contribution and reflect its highest possible ambition, reflecting its common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.'

double energy efficiency improvements by 2030. There is no need to renegotiate the agreement; the impetus is now to deliver on it. 'The Paris Agreement is fully operational. Whether it achieves its goals or not depends on political commitment and leadership—not on further negotiations.'[18]

The Paris framework was intentionally designed around NDCs and equipped with a five-year ambition cycle. It recognised from the outset that implementation would, and must, vary in accordance with CBDR-RC and countries' national circumstances, whether as fossil fuel exporters or importers, forest-rich nations, or highly industrialised economies. Demanding total agreement on operational decisions risks stalling progress at a time defined by urgency and geopolitical fragmentation. Instead, climate multilateralism must adapt to enable differentiated, flexible, and accelerated implementation, while maintaining a shared direction. In this context, a window of opportunity to shift from consensus-seeking to delivery-focused cooperation is emerging. With practically all Paris rules now negotiated and agreed upon in consensus, the UNFCCC process has reached the end of its rule-setting phase.[19] The focus must therefore shift toward the delivery of tangible outcomes.[20] The need for this shift is increasingly recognized by Parties and observers alike.[21] Starting in 2022, COP Presidencies branded the climate summits as "Implementation COPs", including Egypt and Brazil. In addition, the incoming Turkish COP31 Presidency has articulated its vision as the "COP of the Future: the COP of Implementation." [22] These statements reflect a growing acknowledgement that the effectiveness of the climate regime will increasingly be judged by its ability to support and accelerate action on the ground. What remains lacking, however, is a coherent vision for how the UNFCCC process itself should evolve in this new phase, as well as a concrete strategy for operationalizing that shift.

We adopt the language used by COP30 President do Lago[23] and argue that the future of international climate policy lies in a two-tiered governance architecture that combines universal multilateralism with the effectiveness of more flexible and action-oriented cooperation formats.

- **Institutional tier: Preserve, implement, and further develop the UNFCCC**
- **Implementation tier: Accelerate implementation through flexible and high-speed plurilateral formats**

Both tiers are embedded in a broader ecosystem of enabling conditions, including geopolitical coordination platforms, regional organisations, sectoral institutions, and financial systems that shape the political and economic context of climate action. Figure 1 shows the two-tiered future of international climate policy.

[18] Guilanpour and Kinley 2026.

[19] Lydén 2025.

[20] The closest precedent for such a shift can be found in the Montreal Protocol, which, after establishing its core rules, evolved into a regime focused on implementation, compliance, and iterative strengthening, supported by dedicated financial and technological mechanisms. While the climate regime is far more complex, this example illustrates that multilateral environmental agreements can transition from rule setting to delivery-oriented cooperation without losing effectiveness.

[21] See e.g. Obergassel et al. 2022; Watkinson 2025.

[22] Directorate of Climate Türkiye 2026.

[23] Building on the two-tiered approach suggested by COP30 Presidency 2026.

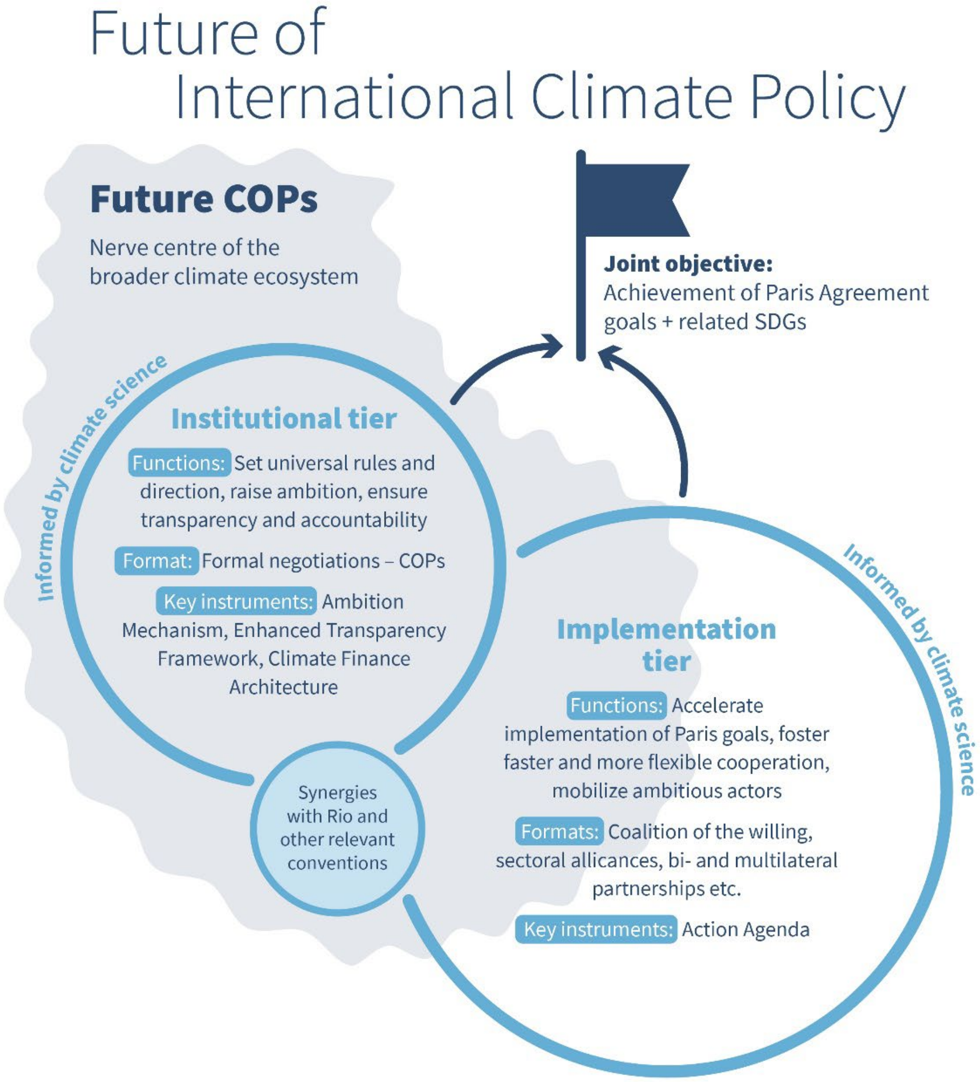

Figure 1: The future of international climate policy

3.1 Institutional tier: Preserve, implement, and further develop the UNFCCC

The multilateral architecture established under the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, achieved through global consensus, must remain the foundation of global climate governance. Its key functions are indispensable[24]:

- Set global direction and political momentum through long-term visions and goals
- Establish universal rules and standards
- Increase climate policy ambition through the ambition mechanism[25]
- Ensure transparency and accountability through mechanisms such as the legally binding Enhanced Transparency Framework (ETF)[26] and the Global Stocktake (GST)
- Organize means of implementation such as financial, technological and capacity building support
- Provide a unique multilateral space where all countries, especially those most affected by climate change, can participate and have a voice on equal ground
- Provide a space to foster cooperation and incentives

The UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement build the nerve centre of international climate governance through these functions. This should be preserved, implemented, and further developed.

From rule setting to delivery

In the short term, the priority must shift from rule setting to delivery, primarily through the Paris ambition mechanism. In the coming 3-5 years, focus should be on:

- Raise ambition through the ambition cycle
  Here, the priority is to engage with Parties toward developing and submitting their NDC 3.0 (and NAPs), to fulfil their obligations under the Paris Agreement, including finance and reporting, and to meet their financing obligations for the UNFCCC secretariat. The second Global Stocktake (2026–2028) then must be prepared and advanced. An ideal GST serves as pacemaker, ensurer of accountability, driver of ambition and provider of guidance and signal for the ambition cycle.[27] The experience and learnings from how the first GST informed (or did not inform) the new NDCs are a valuable basis for modifying the design and execution of the second GST. To strengthen the envisioned ambition cycle, the GST

[24] Partly based on Obergassel et al. 2022.
[25] The Paris Ambition Mechanism (or ambition cycle) is a 5 year pledge-and-review" mechanism designed to steadily ratchet up global climate action incl. the NDC, the global stocktake, and focussed scientific assessments and information. See e.g. Schleussner et al. 2016.
[26] Under the ETF, Parties must submit Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs) and Greenhouse Gas Inventories and undergo international review.
[27] Hermwille et al. 2019.

findings should translate into clear action, beyond NDCs. Inclusion of the Action Agenda should be explored. The GST results, through independent analysis by civil society, can also help reveal whether countries violated international law and which countries or alliances are making substantive progress. The International Court of Justice's advisory opinion[28] on States' obligations vis-à-vis climate change provide an interpretation of international law for this purpose.[29] Critically, the GST, together with other assessments, such as the UNDP Emission Gap Report, UNEP Adaptation Gap Report, and Climate Change Performance Index, could considerably strengthen political pressure by civil society and bilaterally between countries concerning those delivering and those falling short. In this way, it could inform the fourth generation of NDCs and the implementation of the other two Paris goals (Articles 2.1 b and c).

- **Operationalise agreed upon frameworks**
  Key decisions already taken – such as the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) and its UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience, the New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance (NCQG), the Fund for responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD), and the Belém Action Mechanism (BAM) for Just Transition – must now be fully operationalised and, where necessary, finalised. The monitoring, reporting, and continued guidance lie within institutional tier. These frameworks should be designed to allow for faster implementation in the implementation tier.

UNFCCC reform

Amid escalating climate risks, the UNFCCC's future relevance and effectiveness will depend on its ability to deliver real-world outcomes across all long-term Paris Agreement goals. Ten years after its adoption, the Agreement has successfully driven governments, markets, and investors toward climate action and it has reduced projected warming. However, the world is still not on track to meet the 1.5°C goal because commitments are too weak and implementation remains too slow and deficient. The UNFCCC process itself has become increasingly complex and overloaded with negotiation tracks, agenda items, and procedural mandates that consume substantial diplomatic and financial resources and often produce limited practical outcomes. Moreover, the growing influence of fossil fuel interests – through lobbying, agenda setting, and diluting negotiation outcomes – has increasingly undermined trust in the regime's integrity. In parallel, the consensus-based decision-making structure allows a small number of parties to delay or weaken ambitious outcomes, particularly in a context of intensifying geopolitical rivalry and a faster-warming world with more frequent and intense climate impacts. Persistent inequalities in participation and negotiating capacity further disadvantage many developing and climate-vulnerable countries. This raises broader concerns about fairness, representation, and climate justice.

Calls for reform are growing among civil society, think tanks, governments, and international organisations as the gap between political commitments and implementation keeps

[28] ICJ 2025.
[29] Klein and Schäfer 2025.

widening.[30] The UNFCCC must institutionally evolve or it risks remaining normatively strong but practically insufficient.

Any reform agenda should pursue three overarching objectives:

1. Strengthening effectiveness.
2. Improve transparency and accountability.
3. Ensuring legitimacy and correcting the regime's structural imbalances.

Meanwhile, major institutional reforms remain politically difficult because of diverging party interests and the consensus requirement itself. As a result, incremental but continuous reform steps are currently more realistic and politically feasible than comprehensive institutional redesign.[31] This means, in the short-to-medium term, reforms should focus on improving participation, integrity, and procedural effectiveness within the existing framework. Meanwhile agreement by Parties on the need for reforms is growing, including EU Commissioner Hoekstra who calls for COP reforms after series of 'underwhelming' climate summits.[32]

Key priority areas for short term (3 years) reform include

- Improving equitable participation through a streamlined UNFCCC visa system with reliable and rapid processing for accredited participants
- Reducing excessive fossil fuel influence by introducing stronger transparency rules and a UNFCCC conflict-of-interest policy, including disclosure requirements and access to the UNFCCC process only for companies with verifiable transition plans
- Establishing stricter criteria for COP presidencies, including commitments to transparency, inclusiveness, implementation credibility, and international human rights standards
- Improving the meetings' effectiveness through longer-term agenda planning, consolidating agenda items, and reviewing the frequency and formats of negotiating sessions
- Seeking stronger institutional synergies with the other Rio Conventions and greater consideration of international legal developments could further enhance coherence across global environmental governance

Many of these reforms could be pursued through existing institutional mechanisms. These include the 'Arrangements for intergovernmental meetings' agenda item and evolving COP presidency practices, such as stronger cross-presidency coordination and improved chairing procedures.[33] Reform efforts will need careful management of trade-offs – such as between reducing the scale and costs of 'mega-COPs' while preserving openness and meaningful participation for non-party stakeholders and civil society.[34]

[30] Club of Rome 2024; United Call for an Urgent Reform of the UN Climate Talks 2025.
[31] Petri and Karlas 2026.
[32] Hoekstra at a Politico event on June 1st, 2026.
[33] Ibid.
[34] ibid.

Over the medium-to-long term (5+ years), more structural reforms should also be considered, including revisiting decision-making procedures, exploring alternatives or modifications to the consensus principle, and strengthening compliance and accountability mechanisms. Such changes are politically sensitive, so they would likely require a more favourable geopolitical moment to become achievable. The potential role of UNGA and the next UNSG should be discussed if solutions cannot be found within the UNFCCC. Throughout any reform process, however, the UNFCCC's core functions and universal character must be preserved.

3.2 Implementation tier: Flexible and fast ways to accelerate implementation

Given the rules- and norm-setting role of UN conventions and their related treaties (the Paris Agreement in this case), as well as consensus-based decision making's structural restraints in a fragmented world – within the UNFCCC and in consensus-oriented club formats, such as the G7 and G20 – the complementary layer of climate cooperation should be advanced and strengthened. It should be one that enables faster, more flexible, and more targeted implementation. This second tier does not replace the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement; rather, it operationalises it and is part of its implementation. In doing so, it should remain firmly anchored in the principles, norms, and standards agreed in the institutional tier, including a human rights-based approach, the principle of CBDR-RC, transparency, inclusiveness, and meaningful access and participation of civil society and affected stakeholders.

The implementation tier should focus on implementing multilaterally agreed upon rules in variable coalitions and through additional mechanisms such as the Global Implementation Accelerator (GIA). The GIA agreed upon at COP30 is a recent UNFCCC decision that, in practice, links the institutional and implementation tiers, as it is meant to support national implementation of NDCs and NAPs. Beyond implementation, the formats and initiatives within the implementation tier can also serve as incubators for higher ambition by testing innovative approaches, generating political momentum, and demonstrating feasibility. In this way, they can help prepare the ground for subsequent decisions and formal adoption within the institutional tier of the UNFCCC process. A strengthened Global Climate Action Agenda, thematic frontrunner alliances, and bilateral and multilateral climate cooperation are core components of the implementation tier.

This idea is not new. Well before the Paris Agreement, researchers of polycentric climate governance have long argued that climate governance is most effective when multiple centres of authority—from international institutions and national governments to cities, businesses, and civil society actors—operate simultaneously and reinforce one another.[35] While such arrangements can accelerate implementation through experimentation, learning, and flexible cooperation, they may also generate fragmentation, coordination deficits, and uneven participation. This underscores the continued importance of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement as the central framework for collective direction and accountability.

[35] See e.g. Ostrom 2010; Cole 2015; Keohan 2015.

Strengthening the Global Climate Action Agenda

Non-state actors – sub-national governments, cities, businesses, financial institutions, and civil society – are central in climate action. Their contributions should be more systematically integrated into the UNFCCC process that, in return, should support and encourage them. The Global Climate Action Agenda is, together with its supporting components (Climate Champions, Non-State Actor Zone for Climate Action (NAZCA), Race to Zero, and Race to Resilience), a way of achieving this. A strengthened Action Agenda should, as the 5-year vision of the Climate Champions outlines,[36] also:

- Provide clearer standards for transparency, credibility and impact
- Improve tracking and aggregation of non-state commitments
- Create stronger linkages between non-state action and national policies
- Ensure continuity

These effects would help close the implementation gap while strengthening legitimacy and inclusiveness. Formal reporting of Action Agenda progress at COPs would increase accountability and transparency and underscore its role in supporting the implementation of Paris Agreement goals. This is especially important as many existing initiatives fall short of achieving their stated objectives. [37]

The Brazilian COP presidency brought well-needed structure to the Action Agenda and brought it closer to the UNFCCC process. The updated Action Agenda is organised around six thematic axes and 30 key objectives designed to fill gaps and deliver against the Global Stocktake outcomes. Thematic frontrunner alliances are closely connected to, and often part of, the Action Agenda.

Thematic frontrunner alliances (‘coalitions of the willing’)

In an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment, smaller groups of ambitious actors –countries, subnational and other non-state actors – can play a crucial role in accelerating climate action in specific sectors and policy areas. Such voluntary ‘coalitions of the willing’ can mobilise political will and financial resources more rapidly than universal multilateral processes, and they can create spaces for policy experimentation, innovation, and mutual learning at scale. These alliances can show that ambitious climate action is feasible and economically beneficial and thereby generate positive demonstration effects that gradually raise global ambition.

Over time, successful frontrunner alliances can create political and economic dynamics that make participation more attractive for outsiders. The costs of remaining outside the coalition may start to outweigh the short-term benefits of non-participation as clean technologies become cheaper, regulatory standards spread, and new markets emerge. In this sense, ambitious alliances combined with civil society pressure can help create a political

[36] High-Level Champions for Climate Action 2025.

[37] See e.g. Manimaran et al. 2025.

and economic tipping point – a form of 'political 'FOMO' [38]– that incentivises broader participation and accelerates international convergence around climate action.

It is imperative that such initiatives are fully Paris-compatible. A core principle of the Paris framework is that while goals and rules are agreed upon multilaterally, implementation largely remains the states' responsibility. Frontrunner alliances, therefore, can complement the UNFCCC process by accelerating implementation while staying anchored in shared multilateral objectives. Implementing the Paris Agreement, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), international law, and human rights standards should remain their common purpose, whether operating formally within or alongside the UN system. Regular reporting within the UNFCC framework is essential for ensuring transparency and accountability, and for disseminating good practices. Involving civil society organisations and scientific institutions from participating countries can further strengthen implementation capacity, legitimacy, and domestic public support.

COPs could increasingly serve not only as negotiation forums but also as coordination and meeting spaces for such alliances. Follow-up processes to initiatives such as the Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels (TAFF) conference in Santa Marta, Colombia, in 2026 could take place directly before or alongside COP meetings. Emerging processes, such as the fossil fuel roadmap and forest roadmap, could also provide vital institutional anchors for stronger coordination among frontrunner coalitions.

Relevant areas for frontrunner alliances include:[39]

- **Among countries that remain heavily dependent on imported oil and gas** – rapidly reduce this dependence through joint investments in renewable energy, electrification, energy storage, and grid infrastructure. Implementing the TAFF roadmap launched at COP30 could provide a pivotal starting point for such cooperation. Rising geopolitical instability and fossil fuel price volatility – including recent oil and gas price increases related to the Iran conflict – further reinforce the strategic rationale for more rapidly transitioning away from imported fossil fuels.
- **Collaboration on curbing methane emissions** (Global Methane Partnership), strengthening carbon dioxide removal (notably the CDR [carbon dioxide removal] Mutirão Initiative) and **reversing deforestation** (notably the Deforestation Roadmap and Tropical Forest Forever Facility).
- **Alliances to strengthen climate resilience** (adaptation and loss and damage) and **climate finance**.
- **Alliances to foster implementing fiscal measures that apply the polluter-pays principle** to mainstream the climate-proofing of debt, as well as to strengthen climate risk assessment and reporting by the private sector.

[38] "Fear of missing out"
[39] Bals et al. 2026

Bilateral and multilateral cooperation: Partnerships and the mainstreaming of climate action

Targeted cooperation between countries can accelerate transformation. As such, climate, energy, and development cooperation in bilateral partnerships between countries have long contributed to implementing the Paris Agreement and SDGs. Amid geopolitical challenges and conflicts, it is easier to find common ground in smaller settings, especially when limited to narrower areas of cooperation. There are many examples, such as Indo-German cooperation, but there is still vast potential to make them better aligned with ambitious climate policy, including:

- Most imminently to support poorer countries that have yet to submit third-generation NDCs (which were due in 2025), as well as those wanting to develop roadmaps for transitioning away from fossil fuels.
- Climate-focused trade and industrial partnerships, in which the EU Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships (CTIPs) are a notable example, their potential needing further assessment.
- Joint investment platforms for mitigation and adaptation.
- Systematic mainstreaming of climate objectives into broader trade agreements and development cooperation.
- Transformation partnerships with nations changing their fossil fuel business models and wishing to participate in the value creation of future-oriented industries.

Bilateral cooperation can play a substantive role in overcoming political deadlock at the multilateral level and aligning climate action with economic and security interests. Under certain conditions, just a few countries can be enough to tip the scales to create global impact in a specific sector.

3.3 Enablers and supporting arenas

Both the institutional and the implementation tiers are embedded within a wider ecosystem of governance, finance, institutions, and sectoral policies that ultimately determine whether climate goals can be translated into real-world transformation.

A central condition for successful climate action is the large-scale provision and mobilization of climate finance. Meeting the long-term temperature goal and shifting countries and communities onto climate-resilient development pathways will require investments at unprecedented scale across energy systems, infrastructure, industry, adaptation, responding to loss and damage, resilience, and social protection.

Questions of debt sustainability, fiscal space, and access to affordable capital are particularly critical for many developing countries. As a result, international discussions on financing for development, sovereign debt reform, climate-related levies, taxation mechanisms, and polluter-pays instruments are becoming increasingly central to the future of climate governance. The broader challenge is not only to increase financial flows for climate action, but also to align the global financial system with climate-resilient and low-emission development pathways.

The conditions necessary for effective climate action increasingly depend on developments in other policy domains. Climate policy can not be treated as a largely separate environmental agenda. It is deeply interconnected with financial and trade policy, industrial strategy, energy security, technological competition, development policy, migration, and broader geopolitical dynamics. Decisions in areas such as supply chains, critical raw materials, carbon border adjustment measures, fossil fuel subsidies, or energy infrastructure increasingly shape the political feasibility and economic attractiveness of climate action. Similarly, growing climate impacts are intensifying links between climate policy, security policy, and questions of social and geopolitical stability. Effective international climate governance will therefore require much stronger policy coherence across these interconnected domains.

Naturally, not all of these broader framework conditions are helpful for accelerating climate action – some suffer the same blockages we see in the UNFCCC, some are double-edged swords, and others are actively blocking necessary action.

4 Envisioning future COPs

Under a two-tiered climate governance structure, annual climate conferences need to look quite different from the negotiation-heavy COPs of the past. Instead of mainly functioning as massive diplomatic bargaining arenas, they should evolve into a global ambition, implementation, accountability and mobilisation space. The COPs would then act as a nerve centre of the broader climate ecosystem: connecting actors, synchronising ambition, coordinating implementation, and maintaining a shared direction under the Paris Agreement. It, and the negotiations that followed, have by now established most of the core rules and institutional architecture. At the same time, COPs should not be expected to be the sole venue through which implementation is coordinated, ambition is raised, or climate action is delivered. Rather, they should provide strategic direction and political momentum while enabling the wide range of institutions, partnerships, financial actors, regional organisations, and sectoral initiatives across the climate ecosystem to contribute according to their respective mandates, expertise, and comparative advantages.

Future COPs would increasingly focus on whether countries and actors are delivering, how implementation can be accelerated, and how cooperation can close remaining ambition gaps. Formal negotiations would still matter – but they would no longer dominate the system. The success of international climate governance would increasingly be measured by the amount and speed of emissions reductions, resilience outcomes, fossil-fuel phase-out, finance mobilisation, and faster real-world transformation, and not by which negotiated text was produced.

Climate conferences are typically organized across different zones: the Blue Zone, managed by the UNFCCC, hosts the formal negotiations and accredited side events; the Green Zone serves as a public space for civil society, businesses, academia, and citizens to engage with climate issues. The two zones leave a gap between political commitments and practical delivery. A dedicated Turquoise Zone could fill this gap by serving as place for accelerating implementation. It would bring together governments, financiers, development institutions, businesses, and practitioners to accelerate implementation, broker partnerships, and unlock investment (see figure 2).

The COPs would be places for linking the institutional and implementation tiers and contain the elements described below.

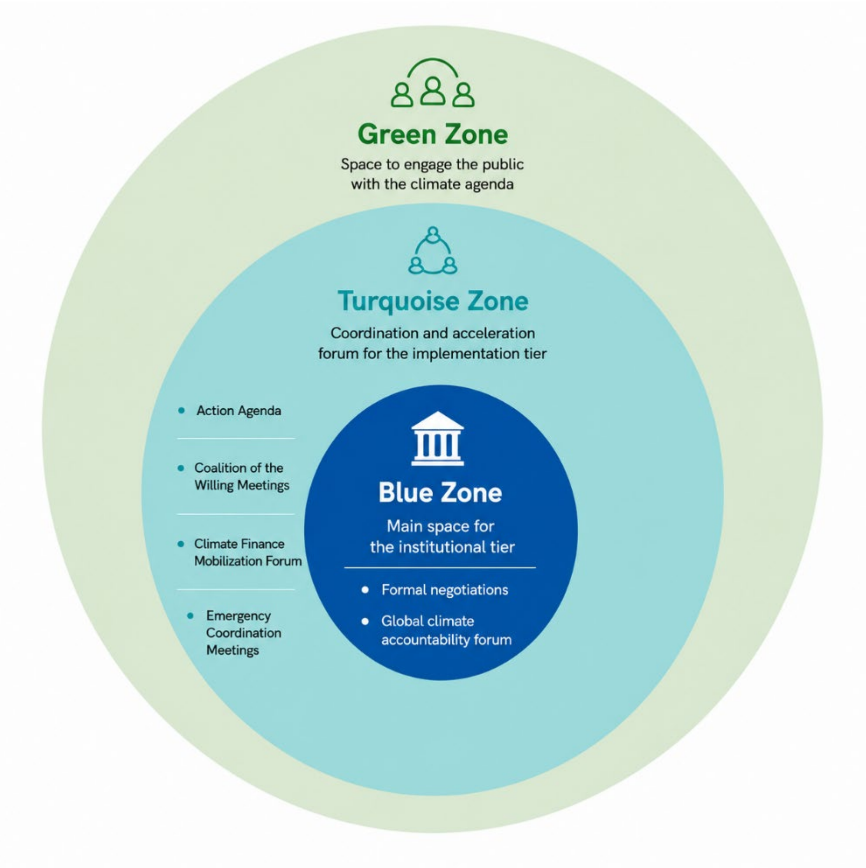

Figure 2: Envisioning future COPs

Blue zone

The blue zone is the main space for the institutional tier where the actual diplomatic decisions, plenary sessions, and negotiations take place. They include:

- **Formal negotiations:** Negotiations will continue to be necessary for addressing major political questions, as part of the next ambition cycle and for reviewing how rules, guidelines and constituted bodies are working, and advancing issues that require collective decisions.[40] Smaller or more exclusive formats cannot replace COPs' 'big tent' function.[41] Sensitive political negotiations could increasingly take place in ministerial formats, thematic high-level dialogues, regional consultations, and targeted political 'contact groups.'
- **Global climate accountability forum:** Future COPs could increasingly serve as high-profile accountability moment where governments publicly assess progress,

[40] Watkinson 2025.

[41] See e.g. Cerisola 2026.

expose implementation gaps, compare transition pathways, and recognize leadership. Rather than creating new compliance mechanisms, this function could build on existing UNFCCC institutions and processes. Future COPs could strengthen their accountability function by elevating the Facilitative, Multilateral Consideration of Progress (FMCP) into a high-level political forum for assessing implementation, identifying barriers, and showcasing leadership as suggested e.g. by C2ES.42 In this way, existing transparency mechanisms could evolve into recurring global stocktaking moments that strengthen accountability through transparency, peer pressure, learning, and public scrutiny rather than formal compliance procedures. Ahead of each COP, the Secretariat could synthesize key findings from transparency reports, technical expert reviews, GST outcomes, and work programme discussions into a small number of implementation-focused scoreboards highlighting progress, bottlenecks, and emerging opportunities across major sectors and thematic areas.

Turquoise zone

The turquoise zone would function as a coordination and acceleration forum for the implementation tier. It would provide a space where a broad range of actors coordinate and accelerate climate action rather than focus on negotiating text. The forum would bring together cities, regions, businesses, investors, Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs), development agencies, civil society, scientists, sectoral alliances, and other stakeholders to showcase good practices, coordinate partnerships, mobilize finance, launch sectoral initiatives, monitor non-state commitments, and connect projects with investors and governments. Building on ideas that have been advanced in discussions on the future evolution of the UNFCCC process, such a forum could draw on the outputs of existing work streams—including the transparency framework, thematic work programmes, and the work of constituted bodies—and use them to identify implementation barriers and practical solutions.[43] The objective would be to support Parties and other actors in developing and implementing effective mitigation and adaptation policies by facilitating learning, cooperation, problem-solving, and the mobilization of support. Other elements of the turquoise zone include:

- **The Action Agenda** could become a semi-permanent implementation pillar linked directly to Global Stocktake outcomes. It could be systematically integrated into the Paris ambition cycle, rather than operating somewhat parallel. This shift could involve standardised reporting frameworks, sector-specific implementation roadmaps, tracking of non-state actor delivery, links between NDCs and private-sector commitments, and stronger scientific assessment.
- The conferences would also be **convening spaces for frontrunner alliances.** Future COPs may increasingly host sectoral transition alliances and coalitions. These groups could meet formally alongside COPs, report progress under the UNFCCC framework, and coordinate new implementation initiatives. The format would preserve the UNFCCC as the central convening platform, while allowing faster progress among ambitious actors. These alliances might hold closed strategic meetings, ministerial coordination sessions, sectoral summits, investment roundtables, and

[42] C2ES 2025.
[43] Watkinson 2025.

technical workshops. Such groups would focus on accelerating implementation among willing actors, developing common standards, and sharing technology and policy tools, rather than negotiating universal consensus decisions.
- The turquoise zone could also provide space for a **climate finance mobilisation hub** – a central annual meeting point where governments, development banks, private investors, philanthropic actors, central banks, and insurers coordinate climate-related capital flows and transformation strategies. The COPs could increasingly function as matchmaking platforms connecting governments, project developers, investors, MDBs, and donors.
- The zone could also host **emergency coordination meetings**, e.g. on tipping points as climate impacts intensify.

To successfully deliver results, countries and observers need to partially send other people than the traditional climate negotiators, such as experts from finance, industry, energy, development cooperation, infrastructure ministries, and implementation agencies. That way, it would be easier to connect the dots and to see beyond the negotiated agenda items.

5 Recommendations for the German Government

Shift German and EU climate diplomacy from negotiation-centred to delivery-centred engagement

Germany and the EU should adapt their diplomatic strategies to international climate policy's new phase by placing much greater emphasis on delivery, rather than on negotiating new language in COP decisions. This shift would require systematically strengthening engagement with the Global Climate Action Agenda, implementation partnerships, and sectoral alliances. COP delegations should, therefore, be composed more strategically, including not only conventional negotiators, but also experts from finance, industry, energy, development cooperation, and implementation agencies. The EU and Germany should also more actively use COPs for implementation initiatives and as coordination spaces for frontrunner alliances.

Invest strategically in frontrunner alliances and sectoral climate alliances

Germany and the EU should strategically focus their support on the frontrunner alliances with the greatest potential to accelerate implementation beyond the pace achievable through consensus-based negotiations. These include partnerships on industrial decarbonisation, fossil fuel phase-out, methane reduction, climate-resilient infrastructure, stopping deforestation, green shipping, and climate-related financial reform, including taxes and levies. Such alliances should remain anchored in the Paris Agreement goals and principles while creating positive economic and political tipping dynamics that make participation increasingly attractive. Germany and the EU are particularly well positioned to convene such coalitions through their diplomatic networks, financial capacities, and regulatory influence.

Foster bilateral/multilateral climate, energy, and development partnerships

As means for achieving the Paris Agreement goals, bilateral and multilateral partnerships with key countries, such as India and Indonesia, should be strengthened as strategic instruments to accelerate sustainable transformation. These partnerships can support the expansion of renewable energy, climate adaptation measures, and the development of resilient infrastructure, while promoting economic development and social inclusion. They should combine financial support, trade agreements, technology transfer, capacity building, and policy cooperation to enable long-term structural change and ensure that climate action aligns with national development priorities. At the same time, these partnerships can improve geopolitical cooperation, strengthen energy security, and contribute to a just and equitable global transition toward climate neutrality.

Actively support incremental UNFCCC reform while defending multilateralism

Germany and the EU should position themselves as leading advocates for pragmatic, but ambitious, reform of the UNFCCC process. Priorities should include streamlining negotiation agendas, improving visa access and participation support for developing-country delegates, and introducing stronger transparency and conflict-of-interest rules on fossil fuel lobbying. Simultaneously, Germany and the EU must defend the UNFCCC process' core universal and inclusive character and resist attempts to weaken multilateral climate governance amid growing geopolitical fragmentation.

Lead the transformation through credible domestic action

Germany and the EU should accelerate their own transformations away from fossil fuels and into systems based on 100% renewable energy. They should enable the move by ambitiously expanding renewable energy production; expanding and modernising electricity grids; electrifying the industrial, building, and transport sectors; making electricity supply and generation more flexible; and integrating European electricity markets more closely than before. Transitioning to a climate-neutral, green, fair, and socially sustainable EU would bolster its economic competitiveness and security, and it would affirm its global position. At the same time, it would ensure aversion of the climate emergency's existential threats, through a just transition.

Additionally, Germany and the EU should take steps to align *all* public and private financial flows with a pathway toward low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development. Going forward, Germany and the EU can accelerate climate-proofing by eliminating fossil fuel subsidies and rerouting public expenditure; strengthening carbon pricing (via the EU ETS) to change private investment incentives; Embedding climate conditionality in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF); Scaling up international climate finance.

To conclude, the future of international climate policy lies according to our view in a two-tiered (institutional and implementation) governance architecture combining universal multilateralism with the effectiveness of more flexible and action-oriented cooperation.

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