

How to Tackle the Climate Crisis?

Through multilateralism or a coalition of the willing?

Two different perspectives

BY PATRICIA ESPINOSA / BY DHANASREE JAYARAM

What is the most practical and effective way to tackle climate change and to protect our societies from its increasingly harmful effects? This question of efficacy is the most relevant question for most people when it comes to climate change.

Simply put, multilateralism is the fundamental approach to address global challenges. And I believe that it is also the best approach to counter the threat of climate change. This has to do with three salient features of multilateral fora, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Climate Agreement.

Multilateralism is the best approach to counter climate change

First, universality. The formal instruments that contain the overarching goals of the international community on climate action have been adopted and ratified by nearly every state in the world. There already is a fundamental, pervasive commitment to act against climate change and its deleterious effects that reflects the will of practically all societies.

Second, legitimacy. The fact that decisions are taken and upheld by governments and societies invests international action with a sense of validity and authority that is lacking in unilateral or partial approaches. There can be no effective climate action

without the fundamental acceptance and commitment of those ultimately responsible for turning decisions into actions.

Third, accountability. International institutions are not only answerable to the collective bodies from which their mandates emanate but also to the national governments that make up those deliberative bodies. This fosters transparency and fairness, and it also reinforces the consent and support of authorities and societies.

Those three features render multilateral action more effective than any alternative. In comparison, unilateral or minority strategies are, by definition, limited in scope and would fail to take advantage of many opportunities to further common climate goals, such as the comprehensive approach afforded by Nationally Determined Contributions. These documents establish each country's contribution to emission reduction and, when taken together, provide the highest level of ambition in climate action. Also, as with any other public policy, their lack of legitimacy would translate into lack of cooperation and compliance. Finally, they are unlikely to be conducted with transparency and fairness, fostering suspicion and rejection from other actors.

This is not intended to suggest that multilateral organizations are flawless. There is, undoubtedly, room for improvement in the way they respond to

international challenges. But disregarding their potential contribution would be a regrettable waste of knowledge and experience at a time when these are most needed.

There is yet another argument in favour of the multilateral approach against climate change: it does not prevent individual countries or groups of countries from adopting more ambitious policies in terms of magnitude and timeframe. On the contrary, coalitions with more purposeful strategies are compatible with the multilateral process. They can reinforce each other and contribute to an even more successful outcome. This is clearly visible in the many initiatives that are part of the Race to Zero and the Race to Resilience campaigns that are

promoted by the UNFCCC and supported by hundreds of organizations, corporations and local authorities around the world.

Multilateral organizations are not flawless

Climate change is a global threat that affects all countries. They should all cooperate to act on a scale commensurate to the urgency of the challenge. Only if they support multilateral efforts with greater readiness, resolve and resources will humanity be able to overcome the greatest threat to its existence – and that of countless living species on the planet – since the beginning of history.

As the host country of the UNFCCC and its sister conventions dedicated to protecting biodiversity and combatting desertification, I am confident that Germany will continue to play an exemplary role in what can be described, without exaggeration, as ‘the issue of our time’: addressing the climate change challenge through ambitious and effective policies, innovative technologies and adequate financial resources.

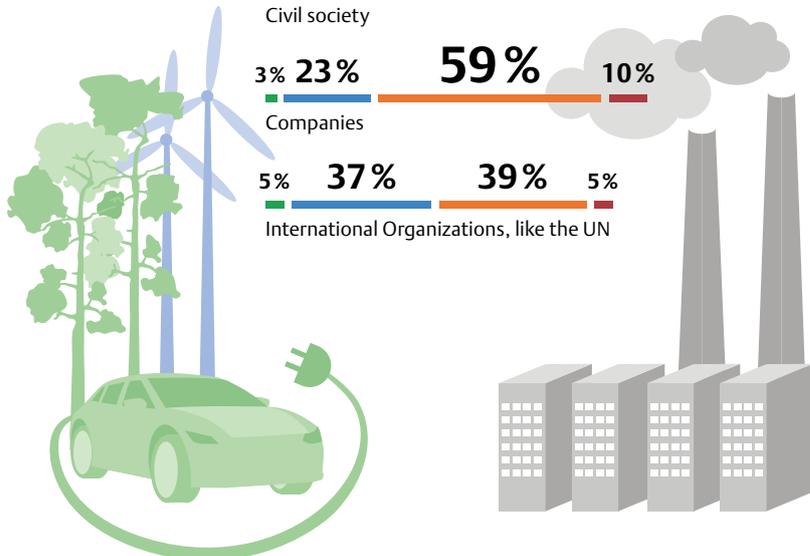
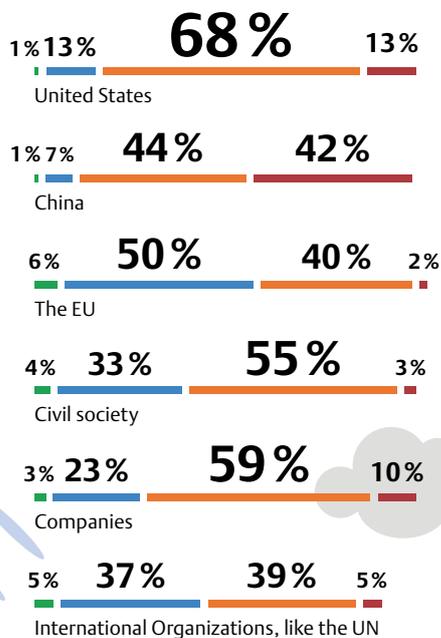
The best way to overcome indifference, scepticism and even free riding is to ensure universal, legitimate and accountable action based on consent and commitment. There is, as the saying goes, ‘safety in numbers’. As we have painfully learnt, no one will be safe until everyone is safe. ✖

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How strongly engaged are the following countries or actors in the fight against climate change?

Very strongly Strongly Not strongly Not at all committed



While the climate crisis is materializing in the form of deadly wildfires, floods, droughts and cyclonic storms, international cooperation on global issues is faltering at various levels and the fault lines in the global climate order are becoming starker as rich countries fail to deliver on their promises of climate finance. In some quarters of the Global South, this has even led to calls for a boycott of the COP26 in Glasgow. The increasing tide of nationalism, protectionism

and populism, on the one hand, and geopolitical rivalries, on the other, have led to multilateralism taking a backseat in global climate governance. While the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has come a long way, its conservative approach towards an unfolding crisis neither raises climate ambition nor achieves climate justice. What the world needs is a climate coalition of the willing that is more dynamic, adaptive and inclusive than multilateral approaches or the existing unilateral or plurilateral forums.

In the current scenario, many decisions are already taken at the G7 and G20. Yet, these global leadership groups have fallen short on issues like phasing out coal, green technology investments in developing countries or accepting their historical responsibility when it comes to burden sharing. The proposal to form climate clubs, involving the highest emitters such as the United States, the European Union or China, could potentially compensate for the absence of a truly global carbon-pricing mechanism and avoid the free-rider problem, which the Paris Agreement has not been able to solve. However, they would most certainly sidestep the demands of developing countries.

More adaptive and dynamic

While multilateralism often marginalizes local initiatives, global climate governance has taken a definite turn towards a bottom-up approach since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2015. This shift is characterized by at least three dynamics. First, a climate order in which the UNFCCC principles of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities are still pivotal, yet the onus on developing countries to reduce emissions increases. Second, more flexible mechanisms introduced by Nationally Determined Contributions. Third – and most importantly – an intensified participation of non-state actors in deciding the future of climate action, as with the International Solar Alliance or the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which encompass the active engagement of regional organizations, businesses, research institutions and civil society organizations.

Private actors are expected to generate a substantial part of future climate finance and it is imperative that they are legitimately streamlined into UNFCCC and other intergovernmental processes. A climate coalition of the willing can be composed of ones based on specific issues or sectors and work towards scaling up local solutions through the support from state actors and other partners. Successful urban climate solutions in one country, for example, could be imbibed by cities in other countries too – something in which city-level governments, urban planners, financiers and NGOs can work together to exchange best practices. Most importantly, these coalitions would be more adept at protecting the interests of the most vulnerable countries, especially in terms of adaptation, as they could mobilize resources from multiple sources.

Germany needs to build new pillars of cooperation

Germany, the United States and other democracies have been criticized for a lack of decisive climate action, which is often blamed on electoral cycles, leadership changes or bureaucratic inertia. To keep the momentum, there is a need to build a transnational, democratic coalition of the willing that would continue to work towards achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, irrespective of the structural issues that state actors face. To support this process, Germany's next government needs to build new pillars of cooperation by diversifying the scope of actors involved in climate diplomacy and by strengthening international partnerships developed by citizens' movements and other actors. This is not to absolve governments of their responsibility, but it could help bring accountability into an international system that seems to be failing to grasp the scale and urgency of the climate crisis. ✖

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