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THE EVOLUTION OF GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on how international cooperation on climate change is evolving as the function of the Paris Agreement moves from goal-setting and rulemaking to action, largely sustained by plurilateral or coalition-like initiatives led by governments as well as non-state actors. At the same time as climate is being integrated into economic growth strategies and trade agreements, the geopolitical and geoeconomic context has been changed fundamentally – primarily by the United States and China – while climate impacts are occurring ever more rapidly and severely. This paper explores how an expanding climate governance landscape can facilitate effective implementation while maintaining coherence, accountability, legitimacy, equity, and ambition.

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INTRODUCTION

The Paris Agreement, adopted in 2015, has entered into a new phase. While in the past, negotiators spent the majority of their time negotiating the rules of the Agreement, those rules are now settled. The important reporting and nationally-determined contribution (NDC) target cycles are underway, and the COPs are increasingly attended not only by negotiators, but also by those working to implement the Agreement through various initiatives. These initiatives are taking the form of plurilateral or coalition-like initiatives both with and without governments. Some of these initiatives are part of the Action Agenda under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Some are not.

As the Agreement has moved further into implementation in the real economy, requiring decarbonization and resilience building in all sectors, climate is also now being integrated into additional bilateral agreements such as trade agreements. This is all taking place in a geopolitical and geoeconomic context that has changed fundamentally in the last few years. The Trump Administration's withdrawal from the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement and its aggressive tactics to increase the use of fossil fuels globally has put pressure on the system. Other ongoing changing power balances – including the rise of BRICS and the role of China in clean technology development and sales, to name just two – are further shifting the geopolitical context. And finally, the fact that climate impacts are occurring in a stunning, intense, and rapid manner prompts increasing pressure to act faster, particularly from least developed countries and small island developing states.

...THE PARIS AGREEMENT REMAINS BOTH THE FOUNDATION OF CLIMATE EFFORTS AS WELL AS THE CONNECTIVE TISSUE LINKING DISPARATE PARTS OF THE SYSTEM TOGETHER.

Climate governance refers to the system of institutions, actors, processes, and partnerships working to advance climate action including through mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage efforts.[1] This definition includes UNFCCC and Paris Agreement processes as well as the growing ecosystem of implementation partnerships, coalitions, financial institutions, sectoral initiatives, and other efforts operating at the economy-level. How should international cooperation on climate change evolve in this highly complex context? What is the role of the COPs and the UNFCCC as well as other forms of cooperation in the future?

1 Jagers, Sverker C., and Johannes Stripple. 2003. "Climate Governance Beyond the State." Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations 9 (3): 385–99. https://brill.com/view/journals/gg/9/3/article-p385_9.xml.

Though climate governance is becoming increasingly polycentric,[2] a central theme of this paper – based on research and convenings of experts – is that the Paris Agreement remains both the foundation of climate efforts as well as the connective tissue linking disparate parts of the system together. However, during times of shifting geopolitics and geoeconomics there must be an active effort to both align initiatives and coalitions to the Paris Agreement goals and integrate the implementation of those goals and decisions into bi-lateral and plurilateral agreements. The COP30 President has outlined his thoughts in his January 2026 letter[3], where he describes a system of two-tiered multilateralism, which includes both slowly emerging consensus-based decisions and coalitions of governments moving forward more quickly on implementation. Building on this idea, we propose a framing of parallel multilateralism, demonstrating the importance of both tiers.

This paper explores how this expanding climate governance landscape can support implementation while maintaining coherence, accountability, legitimacy, equity, and ambition. It focuses on the core functions of the multilateral climate governance system as well as the challenge of aligning Paris Agreement processes with the growing ecosystem of real-economy initiatives, implementation partnerships, sectoral agreements, and other parallel climate governance arrangements.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

- Which functions of the climate governance system are essential and must be protected?
- Which functions could potentially be performed through alternative institutions or arrangements? What role should coalitions, partnerships, sectoral initiatives, and non-state actors play in climate governance?
- How can real-economy initiatives and parallel climate efforts reinforce, rather than weaken, the Paris Agreement framework?
- How can implementation be accelerated while maintaining legitimacy, equity, accountability, and trust?

2 In the context of climate governance, polycentricity describes a system where multiple governing authorities interact at different scales – from local municipalities to international bodies – rather than relying on a single, centralized global authority.

3 Corrêa do Lago, André Aranha. 2026. "Twelfth Letter from the President." https://cop30.br/en/brazilian-presidency/letters-from-the-president/twelfth-letter-from-the-president.

BROAD OBSERVATIONS

Though the Paris Agreement remains the foundation of international climate cooperation, frustrations with the slow pace and ultimate effectiveness of the current system are widespread. These deficiencies require changes both within the negotiations and in efforts alongside the negotiations.

It is important to recognize, however, that the Paris Agreement continues to perform functions that no other institution or forum is currently capable of, particularly in terms of providing legitimacy, coordination, ambition-setting, and accountability. A consistent theme emerging through conversations with experts and practitioners is the importance of preserving and strengthening the Paris framework while supplementing it through complementary institutions, coalitions, sectoral initiatives, and implementation partnerships.[4]

CLIMATE GOVERNANCE HAS ENTERED A NEW PHASE IN WHICH THERE IS GREATER FOCUS ON TRANSLATING EXISTING COMMITMENTS INTO ACTION ...

The challenge facing the system is not institutional collapse but rather insufficient delivery, uneven implementation, and loss of trust, augmented by geopolitical changes. Climate governance has entered a new phase in which there is greater focus on translating existing commitments into action, while maintaining the functions of the agreement for ambition-setting in the future. This leads to questions about how to strengthen accountability mechanisms, improve feedback loops between negotiators and implementers, and ensure that the growing ecosystem of climate initiatives remains connected to shared goals and processes for assessing progress. Additionally, questions remain about how to make the negotiations themselves and the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings more effective. There is also a critical need to elevate adaptation and loss and damage within the broader climate agenda, particularly given the widening gap between climate impacts and available resources.

The growing importance of national implementation efforts, and how to ensure they are effective, fair, and accountable, is also a critical issue. Within the COP ecosystem, the Global Climate Action Agenda[5] and related implementation initiatives are working to respond to the demand for international collaboration efforts to support national implementation. The

4 This was a central point of agreement at our expert convening during London Climate Action Week in June 2026, which brought together over 20 senior climate experts to discuss the future of the multilateral climate system.

5 The Global Climate Action Agenda is the UNFCCC pillar focused on mobilizing voluntary action, with a new five-year vision launched at COP30. https://unfccc.int/news/new-global-climate-action-agenda-work-programme-and-structure-to-operationalize-five-year-vision.

Action Agenda framework and five-year strategy adopted at COP30 aligns the Action Agenda with the implementation of the COP28 Global Stocktake decision. However, the lack of robust reporting and limited understanding of what these initiatives have achieved limits their effectiveness. In general, there is a need for stronger transparency and accountability mechanisms.

Concerns about declining trust and legitimacy within the multilateral system have emerged due to the gaps between commitments and delivery, persistent tensions around finance and equity, and broader geopolitical pressures, particularly from the Trump Administration. Some of the gaps can be addressed through international cooperation such as funding and contributions to the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage. Others will need attention nationally, such as through the implementation and strengthening of NDCs by major economies. Strengthening international cooperation can also enable countries to accelerate implementation.

Above all, the central question to consider is whether and how an increasingly diverse climate governance ecosystem can deliver action at the pace and scale required so that it can increase equitable climate action on mitigation, adaptation, finance, loss and damage. To deliver action, it is critical to preserve the core functions that make international cooperation possible: legitimacy, accountability, ambition, equity, learning, and coordination. Building on this idea, below are five core observations.

OBSERVATION 1:
The Paris Agreement remains the essential anchor of the system

The Paris Agreement remains the foundational framework of international climate cooperation. While implementation increasingly occurs through a diverse set of institutions and initiatives, the Paris system continues to provide universality, core functions, and "connective tissue" that no alternative arrangement currently replicates.

The Paris framework continues to serve as:

- The venue for establishing collective goals and long-term direction
- A universal framework for participation and legitimacy
- A mechanism for periodically updating ambition
- A system for transparency, reporting, and accountability
- The platform through which collective progress is assessed
- A platform for non-stake actors to engage, including in various initiatives

Rather than considering whether alternative initiatives should replace the Paris Agreement, a more useful question may be to understand how different institutions contribute distinct functions within a broader governance ecosystem. This question is explored further in the "Looking Ahead" section below.

OBSERVATION 2:
The system's key challenge has shifted from negotiation to implementation

Implementation support is one of the system's most important responsibilities. Many elements of the climate governance architecture are already in place, including:

- Long-term temperature goals
- National planning mechanisms
- Transparency systems
- Global assessment processes
- Financial institutions and support mechanisms
- Sectoral and thematic partnerships

A challenge is that implementation continues to lag behind target-setting, which points to the fact that the Paris Agreement is entering a new phase. Rather than focusing primarily on negotiating additional commitments, greater attention needs to be devoted to resolving barriers to implementation, institutional learning, translating commitments into measurable outcomes, and enhanced transparency. Creating the enabling conditions for accelerating implementation and creating more inclusive participation with non-Party stakeholders are key factors. The idea of a "diplomacy of implementation" is important to consider, one that is characterized by stronger feedback loops between negotiators and implementers, greater attention to practical delivery challenges, and more systematic learning across countries, sectors, and initiatives.[6] This may mean that the traditional climate negotiators must orchestrate the convening of negotiators from other functional ministries, such as trade ministries, to address barriers to implementation such as tariffs on green goods. Or, it could mean that instead of engaging in international negotiations every year, time might be better spent with national policymakers sharing their implementation plans and addressing complex issues such as supply chain vulnerability in clean technology.

6 The term "diplomacy of implementation" was introduced by a participant in our London Climate Action Week convening.

OBSERVATION 3:
Climate governance has become increasingly polycentric, thus coherence remains essential

There is growing diversification happening in the forms of implementation and institutional players within "climate governance," and important functions are now performed by a wide range of actors, including:

- Sectoral decarbonization initiatives
- Multilateral development banks
- Trade and investment arrangements
- Voluntary coalitions
- Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs and others)
- Corporate and subnational initiatives
- Adaptation and resilience partnerships

This diversification is a reflection of practical realities, particularly that different institutions (governmental and non-state actors) possess different strengths, constituencies, resources, and implementation capabilities. It is important to consider whether these initiatives reinforce or undermine collective goals, and stronger mechanisms may be needed to connect implementation-focused efforts back to common objectives, shared metrics, and collective assessment processes. Focusing future discussions on coherence will be important, with less emphasis on institutional hierarchy and more on ensuring that a growing number of actors contribute to a common set of goals.

OBSERVATION 4:
Accountability is becoming more important as governance becomes more distributed

Accountability is not a standalone function but one that helps to connect multiple elements of the climate governance system. Implementation is increasingly occurring through coalitions, partnerships, and voluntary initiatives, which brings up new questions regarding how progress is tracked, assessed, and communicated. It is important to highlight the continued importance of existing Paris Agreement accountability mechanisms, including:

- Enhanced Transparency Framework processes
- Updated Nationally Determined Contributions
- Biennial Transparency Reports
- The Global Stocktake
- Facilitated Multilateral Consideration of Progress

A core question is whether equivalent accountability structures exist for many of the rapidly expanding implementation initiatives operating parallel to the formal UNFCCC processes, either as part of the Action Agenda or not. Rather than creating new compliance systems, there is a need for attention to transparency, common reporting approaches, learning mechanisms, and stronger connections between implementation initiatives and the broader processes for assessing collective progress. This is becoming increasingly important for credibility, trust-building, learning, investment clarity and course correction. Universities, think tanks, and NGOs will increasingly have important roles to play to provide independent assessments or to hold various actors accountable.

OBSERVATION 5:
Trust, equity, adaptation, and finance are increasingly central to system credibility

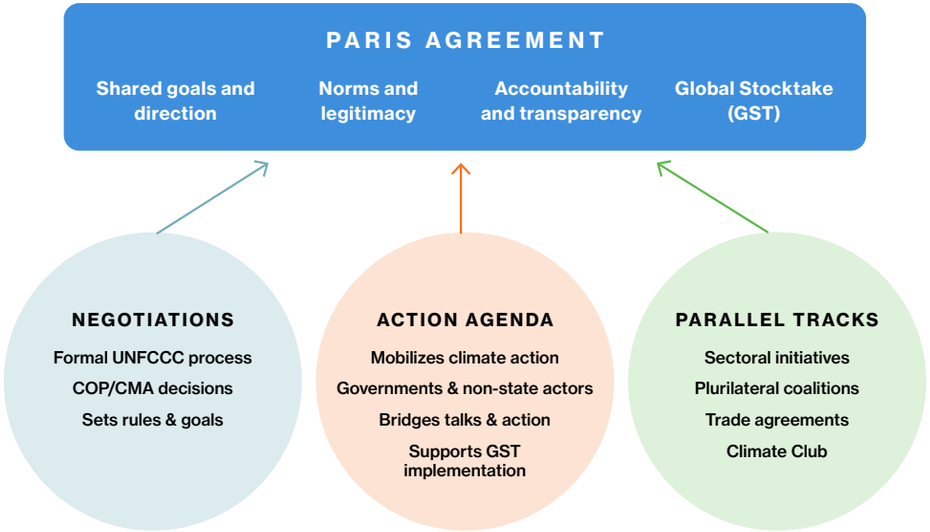
A final observation is that governance effectiveness cannot be separated from questions of trust, equity, adaptation, capacity building, and finance. These are core system functions rather than peripheral concerns and are particularly important as climate impacts intensify and expectations for implementation grow. Several core challenges remain in this area:

- Persistent concern regarding finance delivery
- Questions about representation within climate and financial institutions
- Growing attention to adaptation and resilience, due to current impacts
- The need to strengthen support for vulnerable countries

These concerns highlight that legitimacy is a core component of climate governance, and that equity is a foundational principle for maintaining legitimacy, building trust, and ensuring that an increasingly polycentric governance system supports climate action across mitigation, adaptation, finance, and loss and damage. The effectiveness of the climate governance system depends on institutional commitments as well as whether countries and communities perceive the institutions themselves to be fair, responsive, and capable of delivering meaningful outcomes. Trust and equity are not governance issues to be treated separately, but are instead core conditions that enable all other governance functions to operate. They also embody the values that are widely recognized as central to multilateral processes.

A SIMPLIFIED VIEW OF THE CLIMATE GOVERNANCE LANDSCAPE

One way of framing the climate governance system is as comprising three spheres:



The spheres illustrate how climate governance increasingly extends beyond negotiations alone, while remaining connected to the goals, norms, and accountability structures of the Paris Agreement. Through the lens of parallel multilateralism, the negotiations continue one track by consensus, while action agenda and parallel implementation contribute an additional track.[7]

7 Corrêa do Lago, André Aranha. 2026. "Twelfth Letter from the President." https://cop30.br/en/brazilian-presidency/letters-from-the-president/twelfth-letter-from-the-president.

LOOKING AHEAD

REFLECTIONS AND RESPONSES TO CORE CLIMATE GOVERNANCE QUESTIONS

Drawing on the themes explored in this paper, the following reflections and propositions offer potential responses to some of the key questions central to the evolving polycentric governance landscape.

1) Which functions of the climate governance system are essential and must be protected?

While all of the functions noted above are essential, not all will rely on Paris alone. The functions fulfilled exclusively through the Paris Agreement include:

- Collective goal-setting and direction-setting
- Universal participation and legitimacy
- Establishment of principles
- Ambition cycles and progression
- Transparency and accountability
- Collective assessment through the Global Stocktake
- Norm development and political signaling

These functions provide a regular cycle and common framework that all Parties now utilize, and must therefore be protected, strengthened, and effectively implemented.

To maintain the direction-setting function, a successful second Global Stocktake is essential, along with continued updating and progression of NDCs. Having countries invest time and resources to meet their Enhanced Transparency Framework commitments will also be vital, as well as ensuring full participation in the Facilitated Mechanism on Implementation and Compliance. This is also an area for greater civil society participation. Many of these decisions and processes are likely to be linked with how well the functions below have been implemented both within and outside of the UNFCCC.

2) Which functions could be shared or potentially be performed through alternative institutions or arrangements? And what role should coalitions, partnerships, sectoral initiatives, and non-state actors play in climate governance?

Other functions are performed by a range of institutions and actors that are often working to implement COP decisions, including:

- Finance mobilization
- Technology transfer
- Capacity building
- Implementation support
- Adaptation and resilience coordination
- Knowledge generation and learning

Finance is perhaps the clearest example of a shared function across many institutions. While finance commitments are embedded within the Paris Agreement and are a large focus, delivery is heavily dependent on institutions beyond the UNFCCC process, including multilateral development banks, other financial institutions, and the private sector. Strengthening the connections between COP decisions and these institutions could help translate political commitments into broader scale implementation and finance delivery.

Some of these functions are performed through the Action Agenda, which has been tasked with the implementation of the Global Stocktake decision. As a result, it has become a core element of Paris Agreement implementation and involves both government and non-governmental stakeholders. Different initiatives contribute to the various functions noted above.

There are also functions increasingly performed through parallel, sometimes linked, climate tracks:

- Sector-specific decarbonization
- Real-economy transformation
- Investment mobilization
- Trade agreements
- Bilateral and plurilateral cooperation
- Coalition-building and experimentation

This diversification reflects practical realities, particularly that different institutions (governmental and non-state actors) possess different strengths, constituencies, resources, and implementation capabilities. In many cases, these initiatives can act more quickly or in a more targeted way than universal multilateral processes.

Similarly, plurilateral initiatives such as the Santa Marta Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels have been created as a "coalition of the doing" to implement Paris decisions and include many of the functions noted above.[8] Often, for plurilateral agreements, there is no formal link to the Paris Agreement, but they are aligned with Paris goals. This is true for the Global Solidarity Taskforce where countries have formed a coalition for levies on private jets and first and business class seats to raise needed funds. Additionally, cities are working together to decarbonize and build resilience and provide those functions for sub-national actors. Bilateral trade agreements are also increasingly being utilized in this geopolitical context, including the new India-EU trade deal agreed in 2026.[9] Some of these integrate clauses around Paris and sustainable development and include a focus on the above functions.

In many cases, these initiatives can act more quickly or in a more targeted way than universal multilateral processes. Many of these initiatives are generally aligned with Paris goals, many with explicit reference, and most are seeking to accelerate implementation even if climate is not the main priority. This can be seen as an expansion of effort. However, there is a risk that this expansion could complicate the coherence of efforts and weaken accountability.

It is thus helpful to differentiate among the different types of coalitions and initiatives in order to understand both the functions they are fulfilling and the most effective transparency and accountability mechanisms for each. In some cases, stronger mechanisms may be needed to connect implementation-focused efforts back to common objectives, shared metrics, and collective assessment processes. As the polycentric system is evolving, it is important to focus future discussions on coherence and acceleration of implementation, with less emphasis on institutional hierarchy and more on ensuring that a growing number of actors contribute to a common set of goals.

Rather than focusing on which functions fall within or outside of the Paris Agreement, the more important process will be to ensure that the growing ecosystem of institutions and initiatives is supporting implementation of Paris Agreement goals.

Particularly in the case of the Action Agenda and coalitions, connecting parallel processes to the accountability mechanisms and legitimacy provided by the Paris Agreement would enable the results of these efforts can be better tracked and aligned with existing processes under the Paris umbrella. This would likely assist in enhancing understanding and trust of these initiatives.

8 Astudillo, Rev Dr Neddy. 2026. "Transition to Transformation: A Faithful Roadmap to Moving Away from Fossil Fuels." *Blessed Tomorrow,* April 20. https://blessedtomorrow.org/transition-to-transformation-a-faithful-roadmap-to-moving-away-from-fossil-fuels-blog/.

9 The EU-India Trade Agreement. 2026. European Commission. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/trade/eu-india-trade-agreement_en.

3) How can real-economy initiatives and parallel climate efforts reinforce, rather than weaken, the Paris Agreement framework?

Maintaining coherence with the Paris Agreement framework while creating and expanding coalitions and actors contributing to climate governance is becoming increasingly important. As noted above, it is key to encourage more climate action but also ensure that implementation efforts strengthen the shared goals, accountability mechanisms, and legitimacy provided by the Paris Agreement.

Recommended approaches to reinforcing connections between parallel efforts and the Paris Agreement depend on the type of initiative and include:

- Exploring opportunities to connect initiatives to existing UNFCCC and Paris Agreement mechanisms
  – This could include the Article 6.8 framework for non-market approaches,[10] as well as Article 7.2(c) of the UNFCCC,[11] which provides a basis for facilitating cooperation among groups of countries
- Encouraging Parties to report participation in coalitions, partnerships, and plurilateral initiatives through existing mechanisms in the Enhanced Transparency Framework
  – These include National Communications, Biennial Transparency Reports, and updated NDCs
- Developing greater continuity, transparency, and assessment of Action Agenda activities by strengthening reporting requirements, developing common reporting standards and mechanisms for evaluating progress over time, and continuing the five-year plan adopted at COP30
- Facilitating broader participation in implementation initiatives, including by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) so that parallel efforts support both effectiveness and equity

10 Under **Article 6, Paragraph 8** of the 2015 Paris Agreement (UNFCCC): *"Parties recognize the importance of integrated, holistic and balanced non-market approaches being available to Parties to assist in the implementation of their nationally determined contributions, in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, in a coordinated and effective manner, including through, inter alia, mitigation, adaptation, finance, technology transfer and capacity-building, as appropriate. These approaches shall aim to: (a) Promote mitigation and adaptation ambition; (b) Enhance public and private sector participation in the implementation of nationally determined contributions; and (c) Enable opportunities for coordination across instruments and relevant institutional arrangements."*

11 Under **Article 7, paragraph 2(c)** of the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), cooperation is explicit: *"The Conference of the Parties, as the supreme body of this Convention, shall keep under regular review the implementation of the Convention and any related legal instruments that the Conference of the Parties may adopt, and shall make, within its mandate, the decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention. To this end, it shall: ... (c)* ***Facilitate, at the request of two or more Parties, the coordination of measures adopted by them to address climate change and its effects,*** *taking into account the differing circumstances, responsibilities and capabilities of the Parties and their respective commitments under the Convention."*

- Explicitly linking initiatives to Paris Agreement objectives, including mitigation, adaptation, and finance goals, in foundational agreements, declarations, and reporting documents – This is the case in trade agreements with the involvement of the European Union
- Using COPs and other UNFCCC processes as venues to announce, review, and advance implementation initiatives, reinforcing the role of the Paris Agreement as the foundation of the broader climate governance system

4) How can implementation be accelerated while maintaining legitimacy, equity, accountability, and trust?

Accelerating implementation requires ensuring that bilateral, plurilateral, and other implementation initiatives remain transparent and accountable, including through reporting on participation and progress. Fulfilling existing commitments and obligations, especially those related to finance and implementation support, is also critical for maintaining trust in the broader climate governance system. Because implementation is increasingly occurring through bilateral and plurilateral initiatives, there is a risk that LDCs, SIDS, and other developing countries could be left behind. To avoid this, greater efforts are needed to ensure that these countries are able to participate in, shape, and benefit from implementation initiatives, including those associated with the Action Agenda. Potential approaches include:

- Expanding participation by LDCs, SIDS, and other developing countries in bilateral, plurilateral, and Action Agenda initiatives
- Working with developing countries to identify the types of initiatives that would most effectively support their implementation priorities and needs
- Strengthening the capacity of developing countries to propose, shape, and participate in implementation-focused initiatives
- Improving coordination among initiatives to reduce duplication, improve effectiveness, and lessen bureaucratic burdens on smaller countries
- Designing partnerships around joint interests and shared value creation, rather than extractive arrangements in which developing countries primarily provide energy, raw materials, or other resources for the benefit of developed countries

Ensuring that implementation efforts are not only effective, but also inclusive, equitable, and responsive to country priorities, is an important step towards maintaining the legitimacy of the Paris Agreement and trust in the broader climate governance system.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Climate governance is becoming more distributed. The Paris Agreement continues to serve as the foundation and connective tissue of the expanding landscape. This expansion is positive – the goals of decarbonizing societies, building resilience to climate impacts, mobilizing finance, and addressing loss and damage require an “all hands on deck” approach with action and support from a wide range of actors. It is, however, important to continue to connect, track, and align these efforts to ensure they contribute to a more effective and equitable system of climate action. The Paris Agreement’s ability to provide legitimacy, shared direction, accountability, collective assessment, and universal participation make it a critical tool as implementation becomes a growing focus. Accelerating implementation also requires greater attention to accountability, finance, equity, and trust, along with stronger connections between negotiators and implementors. The primary challenge for the next phase of climate governance will be to navigate an increasingly polycentric system and ensure that it grows and evolves in ways that accelerate equitable climate action across mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage while continuing to remain anchored in the goals of the Paris Agreement.

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