

New alliances: plurilateral initiatives as a mode of cooperation in international climate politics

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SWP Research Paper

Marian Feist

New Alliances

Plurilateral initiatives as a mode of cooperation in
international climate politics



Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

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- Plurilateral initiatives are again gaining importance in climate diplomacy as a complement to multilateral efforts – not least in view of the lack of progress in implementing the Paris Agreement and more difficult conditions in the UN process.
- New alliances are expected to facilitate agreement within smaller groups of countries wishing to lead by example and to effectively advance climate action with ambitious goals and more stringent measures. This, in turn, can have an impact beyond individual initiatives and provide normative pressure and incentives for additional states to cooperate.
- However, plurilateral alliances cannot necessarily overcome the structural challenges that hamper more effective international climate cooperation. In light of this, German and European climate diplomacy should anticipate the specific procedural challenges of individual initiatives, set priorities among the various options, and aim to specify the mandate and design of individual initiatives early on.

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Table of Contents

5	Issues and Conclusions
7	Background and current developments
8	Implementation of the Paris Agreement
9	Trust in and credibility of the multilateral process
10	Multiple crises
12	The logic of plurilateral climate cooperation: Potential and pitfalls
12	The negotiation process and ability to reach agreement
13	Implementation dynamics and spill-over effects
14	Examples
21	Practical implications for climate diplomacy
21	Credibility and prioritisation
22	Trust and communication
22	Representation and legitimacy
24	Conclusions
25	Abbreviations

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New Alliances: Plurilateral initiatives as a mode of cooperation in international climate politics

The focus in climate debates on effective international cooperation has recently shifted towards alliances of small groups of pioneering countries. During the climate summit in Glasgow in 2021 (COP 26), a number of such plurilateral initiatives were announced. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the mechanisms of the multilateral Paris Agreement have so far failed to generate the necessary momentum to reduce emissions. Moreover, the urgency for accelerated decarbonisation and adaptation to climate impacts is growing. It is becoming increasingly pressing to adapt to the impacts of climate change and to find ways of dealing with irreparable loss and damage, not just in the Global South. Russia's attack on Ukraine, geopolitical tensions, as well as short- to medium-term shifts in energy policy priorities have further complicated the situation.

It is hoped that plurilateral cooperation formats can overcome political obstacles and thus effectively advance the implementation of the Paris Agreement. National climate action is supposed to be better coordinated, multilateral cooperation complemented, and the lack of momentum of global climate action compensated for. In view of interfering problems such as energy security, however, the contextual conditions and requirements for diplomatic support are all the more critical if new alliances are to succeed.

Drawing on research on previous initiatives, this study looks at the logic of plurilateral climate cooperation, examines the promises and pitfalls of new alliances against the backdrop of current developments, and discusses the implications for climate diplomacy practice. Plurilateral formats can be an important complementing component to climate action under the Paris Agreement. They can help with implementation, but they cannot transcend the existing dynamics of international climate politics nor offer simple solutions to political challenges. It is not only the technical details that matter, but, crucially, also the design of the political process. The procedural challenges of individual initiatives in relation to the associated interests of partner countries must be anticipated. Furthermore, initiatives with clear object-

tives and instruments should be prioritised; not every additional initiative offers added value. In all of this, the interests of partner countries in the Global South should also be kept in mind. This includes understanding plurilateral initiatives as a complementary component to multilateral cooperation efforts.

Background and current developments

Plurilateral cooperation means that smaller groups of states agree to work together – as opposed to the multilateral process or bilateral agreements. This is not a new phenomenon in international climate politics. The climate regime has long been characterised by a network of different actors, institutions, and forums within and alongside the multilateral process.¹ The failure of the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen (COP 15) has greatly contributed to understanding this network as an opportunity for overcoming political obstacles.² The goal of the Copenhagen summit was to negotiate a new universal, legally binding, global climate agreement to serve as the successor to the Kyoto Protocol. This failed. To be sure, there were a few somewhat tangible and lasting results, such as the promise by developed countries to mobilise US\$100 billion annually for international climate finance by 2020. Measured against its ambition, however, the summit was clearly not successful.³ This raised the question as to what effective international cooperation on climate could look like instead. Plurilateral formats played a key role in this debate. It was hoped that, taken together, they would compensate for the lack

of momentum.⁴ This approach was also discussed in research and policy debates in Germany. A well-received meta-analysis of the landscape of plurilateral initiatives at the time concluded that, although plurilateral approaches could play a complementary role, the initiatives actually being proposed would not produce sufficient incentives to compensate for the lack of transformative climate action.⁵

A number of plurilateral initiatives later emerged in the wake of the Paris Agreement.⁶ After all, the Agreement's decision document explicitly encourages the participation of actors that are not members of the Convention ("*non-party action*").⁷ This also involves

1 Robert Keohane and David Victor, "The Regime Complex for Climate Change", *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 1 (2011): 7–23; Philipp Pattberg et al., "Mapping and Measuring Fragmentation in Global Governance Architectures. A Framework for Analysis", *SSRN Journal* (2014), doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2484513.

2 Robert Falkner et al., "International Climate Policy after Copenhagen. Towards a 'Building Blocks' Approach", *Global Policy* 1, no. 3 (2010): 252–62; Robyn Eckersley, "Moving Forward in the Climate Negotiations. Multilateralism or Minilateralism?", *Global Environmental Politics* 12, no. 2 (2012): 24–42.

3 Keohane and Victor, "The Regime Complex for Climate Change" (see note 1); Radoslav Dimitrov, "Inside Copenhagen. The State of Climate Governance", *Global Environmental Politics* 10, no. 2 (2010): 18–24.

4 This was discussed in the literature at the time under headings such as *building block approach* (Falkner et al., "International Climate Policy after Copenhagen" [see note 2]), *regime complex* (Keohane and Victor, "The Regime Complex for Climate Change" [see note 1]), *minilateralism* (Eckersley, "Moving Forward in the Climate Negotiations" [see note 2]) and – especially in the literature on sustainability governance – *polycentrism* (Victor Galaz et al., "Polycentric Systems and Interacting Planetary Boundaries – Emerging Governance of Climate Change-ocean Acidification-Marine Biodiversity", *Ecological Economics* 81 [2012]: 21–32).

5 Lutz Weischer, Jennifer Morgan and Milap Patel, "Climate Clubs: Can Small Groups of Countries Make a Big Difference in Addressing Climate Change?", *Review of European Community & International Environmental Law* 21, no. 3 (2012): 177–92.

6 Oscar Widerberg and Johannes Strippel, "The Expanding Field of Cooperative Initiatives for Decarbonization: A Review of Five Databases", *WIREs Climate Change* 7, no. 4 (2016): 486–500; Jakob Graichen et al., *International Climate Initiatives. A Way Forward to Close the Emissions Gap?* (Dessau: Umweltbundesamt, 2016); Michele Stua, ed., *From the Paris Agreement to a Low-Carbon Bretton Woods* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-54699-5.

7 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), *Adoption of the Paris Agreement*. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1 (12 December 2015), <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf> (accessed 16 January 2023);

transnational initiatives that are primarily comprised of subnational and non-state actors such as provinces, cities, companies, or civil society organisations.⁸ Another important opportunity for plurilateral cooperation in the context of the Paris Agreement are arrangements for the transfer of emission credits between countries, as per Article 6 of the Agreement.⁹ Plurilateral initiatives that are institutionalised to a greater or lesser extent therefore take on an important role for the implementation of the Paris Agreement by design.¹⁰ The (now reverted) withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement under President Donald Trump in 2019¹¹ gave further momentum to the search for alternative options for cooperation.

Implementation of the Paris Agreement

Progress with the implementation of the Paris Agreement has been insufficient. Parties committed to limit global warming to well below 2°C and to make efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. Now that the Paris rulebook has been finalised at the climate summits in Katowice

(COP 24, 2018) and Glasgow (COP 26, 2021), implementation is what matters. This is expectedly proving difficult in the multilateral context of the UNFCCC: 198 Parties must find a way to reach consensus. The size and complexity of this process make it slow and cumbersome.¹² Negotiating the Paris Agreement under these conditions was made possible in part by the fact that the Agreement includes no fixed emission reduction targets for individual countries. Instead, it is the countries themselves that determine their own ambition levels (*Nationally Determined Contributions, NDCs*). This cooperation logic was new territory for international climate politics at the time.¹³ The Agreement does contain mechanisms according to which states must report on their progress every five years (*“pledge-and-review”*) and raise the ambition of their targets (*“ratcheting-up”*). Transparency and verifiability are supposed to ensure the fulfilment of the pledged contributions. However, there are no substantial consequences for non-compliance. By design, the non-sanctioned reporting mechanisms have only a normative effect.

The centre of gravity for decarbonisation has shifted towards national and plurilateral spheres.

There is an emissions reduction gap between the 1.5°C mark and Parties’ targets and measures; with very few exceptions, even the announced NDCs are not compatible with the 1.5°C target.¹⁴ Current reduction pledges, if implemented, would lead to an ex-

Charlotte Streck et al., “COP 25: Losing Sight of (Raising) Ambition”, *Journal for European Environmental & Planning Law* 17, no. 2, (2020): 136–60.

⁸ Thomas Hickmann, *Rethinking Authority in Global Climate Governance. How Transnational Climate Initiatives Relate to the International Climate Regime* (London: Routledge, 2015), doi: 10.4324/9781315677071; Thomas Hale, “‘All Hands on Deck’: The Paris Agreement and Nonstate Climate Action”, *Global Environmental Politics* 16, no. 3 (2016): 12–22; Graichen et al., *International Climate Initiatives* (see note 6); Thomas Hale et al., “Sub- and Non-state Climate Action: A Framework to Assess Progress, Implementation and Impact”, *Climate Policy* 21, no. 3 (2021): 406–20; Karin Bäckstrand et al., “Non-state Actors in Global Climate Governance. From Copenhagen to Paris and Beyond”, *Environmental Politics* 26, no. 4 (2017): 561–79; Sander Chan et al., “Effective and Geographically Balanced? An Output-based Assessment of Non-state Climate Actions”, *Climate Policy* 18, no. 1 (2018): 24–35.

⁹ United Nations, *Paris Agreement* (2015); Michele Stua et al., “Climate Clubs Embedded in Article 6 of the Paris Agreement”, *Resources, Conservation and Recycling* 180 (2022): 106178.

¹⁰ Charles Sabel and David Victor, *Fixing the Climate. Strategies for an Uncertain World* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s” (Washington, D.C., 2021), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-china-joint-glasgow-declaration-on-enhancing-climate-action-in-the-2020s/> (accessed 10 October 2022).

¹² Joanna Depledge, “The Opposite of Learning. Ossification in the Climate Change Regime”, *Global Environmental Politics* 6, no. 1 (2006): 1–22; Scott Barrett, “Rethinking Global Climate Change Governance”, *Economics* 3, no. 1 (2009); Daniel Bodansky, “The Copenhagen Climate Change Conference. A Postmortem”, *American Journal of International Law* 104, no. 2 (2010): 230–40; Matthew Hoffmann, “Global Climate Change”, in *The Handbook of Global Climate and Environment Policy*, ed. Robert Falkner (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 3–18; Eckersley, “Moving Forward in the Climate Negotiations” (see note 2).

¹³ Robert Falkner, “A Minilateral Solution for Global Climate Change? On Bargaining Efficiency, Club Benefits, and International Legitimacy”, *Perspectives on Politics*, no. 14 (2016): 87–101.

¹⁴ Climate Action Tracker, “Countries”, <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/> (accessed 10 August 2022).

pected warming of 2.7°C instead.¹⁵ Following technical deliberations, the political phase of the Paris Agreement’s Global Stocktake¹⁶ on progress with mitigation, adaptation, and finance is to be concluded at COP 28 in Dubai, followed by a new round of NDC announcements. If ratcheting up emission reduction targets in the pledge-and-review process is insufficient to close the gap, this will have severe consequences for the credibility of the multilateral process in terms of mitigation.¹⁷ If recent developments are any indication, the UNFCCC process is unlikely to provide a decisive impetus in this regard in the near future. The centre of gravity for decarbonisation has shifted – not least in the spirit of the Paris Agreement – towards national and plurilateral spheres.

Trust in and credibility of the multilateral process

In addition to the existing challenges of the multilateral process, the trust of the Global South has been strained recently after promises were not kept. This is not a new problem, but a particularly high level of frustration has built up in recent years. The promise to mobilise US\$100 billion a year by 2020 was missed by US\$16.7 billion and is now expected to be finally fulfilled in 2023.¹⁸ Meanwhile, there is still a considerable funding gap, especially with regard to adapting to the impacts of climate change.¹⁹ In addition, a new dialogue was launched at COP 26 in Glasgow to establish a framework for financial support in

response to loss and damage due to climate change.²⁰ The German government did demonstrate sensitivity towards the urgent concerns of countries that are particularly affected by climate change, and in the run-up to COP 27, there was talk in diplomatic circles of the need to regain trust. The German Foreign Minister travelled to Palau to assure vulnerable countries such as small island developing states of solidarity on the issue of loss and damage. However, this only happened after negotiations in Bonn on this issue had failed to make any progress in the summer of 2022. Many developed countries favoured an insurance-based solution and were cautious to ensure that no legal liability claims could be derived from pledges in the future. In doing so, they underestimated how important a dedicated loss and damage fund would be for developing countries.²¹ Agreement was only reached sometime later, after the EU had signalled its willingness to support the idea.²²

Following repeated promises, what matters from the perspective of the developing countries is fulfilling them. As the Prime Minister of the Bahamas, Philip Davis, put it in the run-up to COP 27: “We are commitment-fatigued and we are pledge-fatigued.”²³ Against the backdrop of the lack of trust in and strained credibility of the multilateral process, plurilateral formats appear to be a viable alternative for

15 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Emissions Gap Report 2022* (Nairobi, 2022).

16 Eliza Northrop et al., *Achieving the Ambition of Paris. Designing the Global Stocktake*, Working Paper (Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute, 2018); Sirini Jeudy-Hugoi and Leon Charles, *Translating Outputs to Outcomes under the Global Stocktake of the Paris Agreement*, OECD/IEA Climate Change Expert Group Papers, no. 2022/01 (Boulogne-Billancourt, 2022), doi: 10.1787/2227779X.

17 Marian Feist and Oliver Geden, *Climate Negotiations in Times of Multiple Crises. Credibility and Trust in International Climate Politics after COP 27*, SWP Comment 10/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, February 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C10.

18 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Aggregate Trends of Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2013–2020* (Paris: OECD, 2022).

19 UNEP, *Adaptation Gap Report 2022* (Nairobi, 2022).

20 Susanne Dröge and Oliver Geden, *Next COP Ahead: Europe Has Work to Do*, SWP Comment 2/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2021), doi: 10.18449/2022C02; Michael Jacobs, “Reflections on COP26: International Diplomacy, Global Justice and the Greening of Capitalism”, *The Political Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (2022): 270–77.

21 Although the differentiation between developed and developing countries in no way reflects the heterogeneity within these groups of countries in terms of economic power and greenhouse gas emissions, it is not only still institutionally anchored in the UN Framework Convention on Climate, which is reflected, for example, in the composition of committees, but also frequently determines the central lines of conflict.

22 Svea Koch et al., “The EU in Sharm-El-Sheikh. Good Cop at a Bad COP?” (Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability, 2022), <https://blogs.idos-research.de/2022/11/24/the-eu-in-sharm-el-sheikh-good-cop-at-a-bad-cop/> (accessed 25 November 2022); Feist and Geden, *Climate Negotiations in Times of Multiple Crises* (see note 17).

23 Jasper Ward, “Caribbean Nations Should Push for Climate Finance at COP27, Bahamas PM Says”, *Reuters* (online), 16 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/caribbean-nations-should-push-climate-finance-cop27-bahamas-pm-says-2022-08-16/> (accessed 16 August 2022).

making progress, without including the complications of politically difficult UNFCCC processes.

Multiple crises

With regard to the promises of plurilateral climate cooperation, much has recently been made of the fact that there are multiple acute crises in international politics. At the beginning of 2022, things were looking comparatively favourable for ambitious climate policy. The United States had returned to the Paris Agreement under President Joe Biden. The European Union (EU) had advanced the implementation of its Green Deal with the European Climate Law.²⁴ The German government set out to develop a more coherent and strategic approach to *Klimaaußenpolitik* (literally: climate foreign policy).²⁵ Now, Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 has worsened the conditions for international climate cooperation. To be sure, the nexus between climate and security is by no means a new issue area.²⁶ Nonetheless, pressing short-term energy and security issues are now having a more noticeable impact on international negotiations than before.²⁷ Inflation and the fiscal aftermath of the Covid pandemic are also impacting the political room for manoeuvre.

24 European Commission, "A European Green Deal. Striving to Be the First Climate-neutral Continent" (Brussels, 2021), https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en (accessed 21 November 2021).

25 Lukas Kahlen et al., *Climate Audit of German Foreign Diplomacy. Assessing the Alignment of German International Engagement with the Objectives of the European Green Deal and the Paris Agreement* (Cologne: New Climate Institute, 2022).

26 Jon Barnett, "Security and Climate Change", *Global Environmental Change* 13, no. 1 (2003): 7–17; Jon Barnett and Neil Adger, "Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict", *Political Geography* 26, no. 6 (2007): 639–55; Wissenschaftlicher Beirat der Bundesregierung Globale Umweltveränderungen [German Advisory Council on Global Change], *Welt im Wandel. Sicherheitsrisiko Klimawandel* (Berlin: WBGU, 2007); John Podesta and Peter Ogden, "The Security Implications of Climate Change", *The Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2008): 115–38.

27 Laurence Tubiana et al., *Between Crises and Decarbonisation. Realigning EU Climate and Energy Policy for the New "State of the World"*, Policy Brief, no. 42/2022 (Florence: Florence School of Regulation, 2022).

Fragmentation in the international system threatens to make international climate cooperation more difficult.

In addition, fragmentation in the international system threatens to make international climate cooperation more difficult,²⁸ including between key actors such as the United States and China. Although there were some positive signals in this regard during the climate conference in Glasgow in 2021,²⁹ currently strained relations have impacted potential climate cooperation between the two countries.³⁰ There are hopes that national industrial policy instruments related to climate action, such as the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, will mutually enhance one another. High-level cooperation, however — as in the *U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s*³¹ — has effectively been suspended in view of recent tensions, for example over the issue of Taiwan.³²

On the other hand, the UNFCCC process has displayed a certain degree of resilience. Global political events do shape the contexts of the annual climate summits. The global financial crisis in 2008, for example, had a significant impact on priorities at the Copenhagen summit in 2009 (COP 15). However, technical negotiations on specific issues are not exposed to global political dynamics to the same degree. Negotiating strands often take place over several years

28 Lars Brozus et al., *Global Issues 2022*, Working Paper, no. 1 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022AP01.

29 U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s" (see note 11).

30 Oliver Milman, "What Does the US-China Row Mean for Climate Change?", *The Guardian* (online), 5 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/aug/05/what-does-the-us-china-row-mean-for-climate-change-taiwan> (accessed 10 October 2022); Maxine Joselow, "5 Things to Know about the Suspension of U.S.-China Climate Talks", *The Washington Post* (online), 24 August 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/08/24/5-things-know-about-suspension-us-china-climate-talks/> (accessed 10 October 2022).

31 U.S. Department of State, "U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s" (see note 11).

32 Hanns G. Hilpert et al., eds., *Dealing with Taiwan*, SWP Research Paper 9/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022RP09.

among smaller groups of diplomats who have built interpersonal relationships. The protracted nature of UNFCCC processes therefore — for all its difficulties — allows for the building of trust among Parties that goes beyond formal compliance mechanisms.³³ Russia’s attack on Ukraine has undoubtedly had an impact, but in a more indirect way. For example, the energy policy responses of developed countries such as Germany have been perceived as incoherent to the countries’ climate ambitions, further straining the credibility of emission reduction pledges and the trust of developing countries.³⁴ Plurilateral cooperation is seen as a way to advance the implementation of the Paris Agreement in cooperation with partner countries, even in light of these many issues.

33 John Vogler, “The Institutionalisation of Trust in the International Climate Regime”, *Energy Policy* 38, no. 6 (2010): 2681–87.

34 Feist and Geden, *Climate Negotiations in Times of Multiple Crises* (see note 17).

The logic of plurilateral climate cooperation: Potential and pitfalls

Plurilateral cooperation is not a new format in international climate politics. The idea has recently regained a lot of traction, and it is hoped that it can help overcome obstacles and effectively advance the implementation of the Paris goals. In the following, we draw on the extensive existing academic and policy literature on the topic to critically examine these promises and highlight the pitfalls. Selected recent and historical examples serve to illustrate the range of plurilateral initiatives and to examine the extent to which the promises are realised in practice.

The negotiation process and ability to reach agreement

As indicated above, one of the key promises of plurilateral initiatives is that they simplify the process of reaching agreement, increasing the chances for cooperation.³⁵ Since the number of actors involved is limited by definition, fewer divergent interests need to be reconciled.³⁶ Moreover, the willingness of gov-

ernments involved to cooperate in the establishment of a climate policy initiative suggests a relatively high homogeneity of interests, as in a coalition of the willing,³⁷ whereas in multilateral UN negotiations, the interests of all Parties must be reconciled. The danger of individual countries or groups of countries blocking progress is minimised in this context, compared to the UNFCCC process.³⁸

Moreover, plurilateral initiatives on climate cooperation allow for a thematic focus and – at least in the initial phase – a high degree of flexibility with regard to the goals and instruments.³⁹ Global agreements must develop their potential enforceability ex ante and, in doing so, must also reconcile diverse interests and priorities on a wide range of issues across the spectrum of international climate policy, including emission reductions, climate impact adaptation and, more recently, loss and damage as well as carbon removal. In the process, different issues can be played off against each other in the negotiations for tactical reasons – especially in the politically important Cover Decisions.⁴⁰ Disagreements on individual issues can therefore jeopardise an entire agreement.

35 Falkner et al., “International Climate Policy after Copenhagen” (see note 2); Eckersley, “Moving Forward in the Climate Negotiations” (see note 2); Achim Hagen and Klaus Eisenack, “Climate Clubs versus Single Coalitions. The Ambitions of International Environmental Agreements”, *Climate Change Economics* 10, no. 03 (2019): 1950011; Anthony Dworkin and Mats Engström, *We’ll Always Have Paris. How to Adapt Multilateral Climate Cooperation to New Realities* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/well-always-have-paris-how-to-adapt-multilateral-climate-cooperation-to-new-realities/> (accessed 3 November 2022).

36 David Victor, *The Case for Climate Clubs*, Think Piece – E15 Expert Group on Measures to Address Climate Change and the Trade System (Geneva: The E15 Initiative, 2015),

<https://e15initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/E15-Climate-Change-Victor-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 27 July 2022).

37 Thomas Hale, “A Climate Coalition of the Willing”, *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2011): 89–101.

38 Depledge, “The Opposite of Learning” (see note 12); Victor, *The Case for Climate Clubs* (see note 36).

39 Lauri Peterson et al., *What Determines Climate Ambition? Analysing NDC Enhancement with a Mixed-method Design* (Athens: NDC Aspects, 2022); Victor, *The Case for Climate Clubs* (see note 36).

40 Koch et al., “The EU in Sharm-El-Sheikh. Good Cop at a Bad COP?” (see note 22).

Plurilateral initiatives, on the other hand, tend to focus on specific policy areas or economic sectors.⁴¹ This makes it possible to compartmentalise the challenge of reducing emissions into individual components within which the involved actors can more easily determine whether their interests and priorities are being met.⁴² The greater the technical and legal complexities of an initiative, the more worthwhile it might be to limit the scope in terms of members and issues.⁴³ One of the disadvantages of plurilateral cooperation compared to multilateral agreements – namely, the low number of participants – then becomes a strength.

Plurilateral forums do not in themselves provide a principled solution to existing political differences.

However, as in multilateral negotiations, controversial issues are often avoided by using vague wording in an agreement (“constructive ambiguity”). This may facilitate reaching an initial agreement. But important details then remain to be negotiated. Such post-agreement negotiations are critical for what the initiative will eventually look like and are therefore often no less politically charged. Plurilateral forums can simplify negotiations. However, they do not in themselves provide a principled solution to existing political differences.

Implementation dynamics and spill-over effects

Many plurilateral initiatives focus on a specific goal that their members commit to. For example, at COP 26 in Glasgow, Denmark and Costa Rica launched the *Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance*, which countries could join

in order to pledge phasing-out fossil fuels.⁴⁴ Normatively affirming a common ambition such as this and providing a framework for negotiating specific instruments are in themselves key functions of plurilateral initiatives.⁴⁵ If the intention is credibly signalled to a critical mass of important actors, this can have an impact on the agenda in the multilateral context of the UNFCCC as well. Moreover, plurilateral initiatives can fulfil a coordinating function, for example by agreeing on closer cooperation in the development, implementation, and financing of key technologies.⁴⁶ They can provide a forum for negotiating specific policy solutions and demonstrate their practical viability.⁴⁷ If economically strong countries are represented in the initiative, there may also be positive spill-over effects when other countries adopt these policies, similar to the so-called Brussels Effect.⁴⁸

The core promise of plurilateralism, however, is not just that it facilitates agreement on ambitious new goals, but specifically that it allows for negotiating more stringent policies than could realistically be expected in the multilateral process. Economist William Nordhaus has written a seminal paper on this aspect.⁴⁹ In it, he proposes to respond to the challenge of collective action by establishing a club of pioneer states. Members would agree on common goals and instruments, specifically a common emissions trading system. A border adjustment mechanism would then prevent carbon-intensive products from being imported as substitutes from countries outside the club.⁵⁰ This mechanism would also create

41 Lukas Hermwille et al., “A Climate Club to Decarbonize the Global Steel Industry,” *Nature Climate Change* 12, no. 6 (2022): 494–96.

42 Joshua Busby and Johannes Urpelainen, “Following the Leaders? How to Restore Progress in Global Climate Governance,” *Global Environmental Politics* 20, no. 4 (2020): 99–121.

43 Victor, *The Case for Climate Clubs* (see note 36); Leon Martini and Benjamin Görlach, *What Role for a Climate Club under the G7 Presidency? Options for a Climate Club under the German G7 Presidency*, Policy Brief (Berlin: Ecologic Institute, 2022).

44 Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance, “Who We Are”, n.d., <https://beyondoilandgasalliance.org/who-we-are/> (accessed 19 February 2023).

45 Robert Falkner et al., “Climate Clubs. Politically Feasible and Desirable?,” *Climate Policy* 22, no. 4 (2022): 480–87.

46 Leonidas Paroussos et al., “Climate Clubs and the Macroeconomic Benefits of International Cooperation on Climate Policy,” *Nature Climate Change* 9, no. 7 (2019): 542–46; Sabel and Victor, *Fixing the Climate* (see note 10).

47 Victor, *The Case for Climate Clubs* (see note 36).

48 Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect. How the European Union Rules the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020).

49 William Nordhaus, “Climate Clubs. Overcoming Free-riding in International Climate Policy,” *American Economic Review* 105, no. 4 (2015): 1339–70; Jon Hovi et al., “The Club Approach. A Gateway to Effective Climate Co-operation?,” *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (2019): 1071–96.

50 Susanne Dröge, *Ein CO₂-Grenzausgleich für den Green Deal der EU*, SWP-Studie 9/2021 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2021).

incentives for non-cooperating countries to deviate from the otherwise dominant strategy of non-cooperation, counteracting the free-rider problem in international climate cooperation, that is, the problem that non-cooperating countries benefit from the mitigation measures of others.⁵¹ The incentives associated with club benefits would ideally create a positive-sum cascade, enticing ever more countries to join the initiative.⁵²

However, such a club raises politically sensitive questions. Are there sanctioning mechanisms in cases of non-compliance with the conditions for membership? How does the club handle differentiation between members according to the UNFCCC principle of *Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR)*. For example, there are exemptions planned for poorer non-EU countries as part of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) of the EU Emissions Trading System, but it is considered problematic that wealthy countries would decide whether the climate policies of poorer countries are sufficient for granting such an exemption.⁵³

Normative initiatives whose members are mainly committed to common goals are relatively easy to agree on politically.

The necessary extent of cooperation required for setting up club incentive mechanisms can affect the ability to reach an agreement. The degree of policy coordination and change that is needed is by no means easy to negotiate, even in smaller formats.⁵⁴ The reasons for this may lie in, for example, the socio-

economic implications for the participating countries.⁵⁵ Another issue could be that mechanisms agreed as part of a plurilateral initiative might be met with less acceptance in the population simply because of the way they were agreed.⁵⁶ Normative initiatives whose members are mainly committed to common goals are relatively easy to agree on politically; but the more transformative an initiative is intended to be, the more challenging it becomes to reach agreement, even among supposedly like-minded partner countries.⁵⁷ This carries the risk of postponing the negotiation of the details needed to actually implement the initiative. In the process of these negotiations, compromises need to be made. This risks diluting the initiative, that is, reducing the level of ambition and stringency in order to maintain the possibility of reaching an agreement. Yet, limiting the need for compromises is precisely the goal of going small in the first place. A key promise of plurilateral cooperation is that it expands the potential extent for ambitious climate action due to the lower level of heterogeneity concerning interests and a smaller number of veto players.

Examples

The potential and pitfalls in practice can be illustrated using selected current and historical examples that show what lessons can be learnt for climate diplomacy practice, especially against the backdrop of current political challenges.

Global Methane Pledge

Methane (CH₄) is a particularly potent greenhouse gas released by human activity, mainly through fossil fuel extraction and land and waste management.⁵⁸ The

51 Nordhaus, “Climate Clubs” (see note 49).

52 Clara Brandi et al., *Zwischen Multilateralismus und Multilateralismus. Chancen und Risiken von Vorreiterallianzen in der internationalen Handels- und Klimapolitik*, Analysen und Stellungnahmen, no. 7/2015 (Bonn: Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2015); Busby and Urpelainen, “Following the Leaders?” (see note 42); Simon Sharpe and Timothy Lenton, “Upward-scaling Tipping Cascades to Meet Climate Goals. Plausible Grounds for Hope”, *Climate Policy* 21, no. 4 (2021): 421–33; Simone Tagliapietra and Guntram B. Wolff, “Conditions Are Ideal for a New Climate Club”, *Energy Policy* 158 (2021): 112527.

53 Anne Gläser and Oldag Caspar, *Less Confrontation, More Cooperation. Increasing the Acceptability of the EU Carbon Border Adjustment in Key Trading Partner Countries*, Policy Brief (Bonn: Germanwatch, 2021).

54 Ibid.

55 Greg Muttitt et al., “Socio-political Feasibility of Coal Power Phase-out and Its Role in Mitigation Pathways”, *Nature Climate Change* 13, no. 2 (2023): 140–47; Ajay Gambhir, “Powering Past Coal Is Not Enough”, *Nature Climate Change* 13, no. 2 (2023): 117–18.

56 Robert Gampfer, “Minilateralism or the UNFCCC? The Political Feasibility of Climate Clubs”, *Global Environmental Politics* 16, no. 3 (2016): 62–88.

57 Falkner et al., “Climate Clubs” (see note 45).

58 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022. Mitigation of Climate Change. Working Group III contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Geneva: IPCC, 2022).

Global Methane Pledge was announced by the United States and the EU at a meeting of the *Major Economies Forum* in September 2021 and launched at COP 26 in Glasgow in November of that year – with the goal of reducing global methane emissions by at least 30 per cent by 2030 compared to 2020.⁵⁹ The Global Methane Pledge illustrates the low threshold that plurilateral initiatives can have. As a normative club,⁶⁰ membership initially involves merely a declaration of commitment to the common goal. Members are neither offered special benefits, nor are there tangible sanctions in case of non-compliance. There are 150 countries that have joined the Pledge thus far.⁶¹ On the one hand, this suggests a lack of potential momentum for implementation that the initiative can set in motion. It achieves a high degree of universality in terms of many members by means of the voluntary nature of the commitment. On the other hand, the high number of members can increase the pressure on other states to cooperate if the initiative is successful. China, for instance – while often emphasising its right to economic development – is increasingly concerned about being perceived as a responsible actor in international mitigation efforts.⁶² In light of this, the sheer size of the group signed up for the Global Methane Pledge – even though China is not a member – has increased the pressure on the country to include methane in the Joint Statement with the United States at the Glasgow climate summit.⁶³ Many of the initiatives launched in Glasgow have a similar, primarily normative character, such as the Glasgow

Declaration on Forests and Land Use⁶⁴ and the International Aviation Climate Ambition Coalition.⁶⁵

There is a fundamental issue with initiatives such as this, however, in that they remain purely normative commitments and do not create any concrete incentives for compliance. If the goals end up not being met, this will further impede the credibility and potential signalling effect of common goals in international climate cooperation, which is already under strain.

Mission Innovation

Mission Innovation is one of the many initiatives that have emerged since 2015 in the wake of the Paris Agreement. Today it consists of 24 members (23 states and the EU) and includes both developed and developing countries.⁶⁶ In the first round of the initiative, members committed to doubling their investments into the research and development of climate-friendly energy production technology by 2020. The initiative then entered a second phase. In total, the investments made available in the first round were to increase from approximately US\$15 billion in 2015 to approximately US\$30 billion.⁶⁷ This target was not reached, although there were significant differences between the individual member states. While the majority of member states have increased their investments by 40–60 per cent, China has in fact doubled its investment – from about US\$4 billion to about US\$8 billion – over the agreed period.⁶⁸

59 The White House, “Joint US-EU Press Release on the Global Methane Pledge” (Washington, D.C., 18 September 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/09/18/joint-us-eu-press-release-on-the-global-methane-pledge/> (accessed 7 September 2022).

60 Falkner et al., “Climate Clubs” (see note 45).

61 Global Methane Pledge, “Pledges. Participants”, n.d., <https://www.globalmethanepledge.org/#pledges> (accessed 24 March 2023).

62 Phillip Stalley, “Principled Strategy. The Role of Equity Norms in China’s Climate Change Diplomacy”, *Global Environmental Politics* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1–8; Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, “Global Norms and Major State Behaviour. The Cases of China and the United States”, *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 329–52.

63 U.S. Department of State, “U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s” (see note 11).

64 UK Government and UNFCCC, “Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use” (Glasgow, 2 November 2021), <https://ukcop26.org/glasgow-leaders-declaration-on-forests-and-land-use/> (accessed 23 March 2023).

65 Department for Transport, “COP 26 Declaration: International Aviation Climate Ambition Coalition” (Glasgow, 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cop-26-declaration-international-aviation-climate-ambition-coalition/cop-26-declaration-international-aviation-climate-ambition-coalition> (accessed 23 March 2022).

66 Mission Innovation, “Our Members”, n.d., <http://www.mission-innovation.net/our-members/> (accessed 11 June 2023).

67 Mission Innovation, *Strategies, Progress, Plans, and Funding Information Submitted by Mission Innovation Members. Updated June 6, 2017* (2017), <http://mission-innovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MI-Country-Plans-and-Priorities.pdf> (accessed 11 June 2023).

68 Zdenka Myslikova and Kelly Sims Gallagher, “Mission Innovation Is Mission Critical”, *Nature Energy* 5 (2020): 732–34, doi: 10.1038/s41560-020-00694-5.

Mission Innovation is characterised by a clear thematic focus and a distinct, quantified target that makes progress traceable and verifiable. However, much like many of the initiatives that emerged during the course of the Glasgow climate summit, it does not include any compliance mechanisms that could ensure commitments are kept.⁶⁹ Considering the differences in target fulfilment, it seems questionable as to whether the voluntary commitment alone and the associated normative pressure on the participating states are sufficient to account for the investments that have actually been made. This is illustrated by the example of China, whose additional investments in the period in question were also driven by economic growth and the significance of the solar industry⁷⁰ for its economic and energy policy. Although counterfactual, it is not unlikely that China's considerable investments in renewable energy technologies would have developed in a similar fashion, even without membership in Mission Innovation.

However, this caveat, albeit not insignificant, should not be taken to mean that the initiative has been a failure. The example of Mission Innovation illustrates the potential positive side effects of plurilateral initiatives, which, although they fall short of setting economic incentives, nevertheless go beyond lip service. Apart from signalling climate policy ambition, their benefit is primarily their coordinating function. This was perceived quite positively, as it facilitated regular exchange between different countries.⁷¹ This exchange allows for drawing lessons about, for example, the effective institutional design of research funding and the conditions for successful seed funding to mobilise private capital.⁷² On the other hand, the lack of enforcement mechanisms means that Mission Innovation is not immune to broader developments in international climate

politics. The temporary withdrawal of the United States from international climate cooperation under President Trump in 2017 gave observers cause for concern in this regard.⁷³ The hope that the mechanisms of plurilateral cooperation will transcend such political dynamics cannot be realised with an initiative whose function is mostly focussed on coordination.

4 per 1000

The fact that coordination, evaluation, and exchange within the framework of plurilateral cooperation initiatives are not necessarily mere by-products is illustrated by the example of the "4 per 1000" initiative. This initiative is also one of the many to emerge in 2015 in the course of COP 21 in Paris. Initiated by the French government, the goal is to increase soil carbon sequestration by 0.4 per cent per year (4‰, hence 4 per 1000) – in particular through changes in agricultural practices – in order to partly offset man-made carbon emissions.⁷⁴

The implementation and especially the evaluation of progress have proven to be a challenge; scientific and technical advisory bodies have been set up for this purpose.⁷⁵ In principle, however, the initiative's focus on only one aspect of negative emissions is an advantage. In terms of ambition, it is not intended to do any more or less than its mandate and design allow.

However, it is precisely this technical focus that turns out to be a decisive limiting factor in terms of reproducibility in other contexts. The initiative can be implemented without fundamental technical difficulties and does not entail any significant economic disadvantages or risks for the participating countries.⁷⁶ Accordingly, there is the potential for positive

⁶⁹ Matthew Hannon, *Mission Impossible? Five Challenges Facing 'Mission Innovation', the Global Clean Energy Innovation Drive*, Policy Brief (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde International Public Policy Institute, 2016).

⁷⁰ Jeffrey et al., *The New Solar System. China's Evolving Solar Industry and Its Implications for Competitive Solar Power in the United States and the World* (Stanford, CA: Steyer-Taylor Center for Energy Policy and Finance, Stanford University, 2017).

⁷¹ Myslikova and Sims Gallagher, "Mission Innovation Is Mission Critical" (see note 68).

⁷² Varun Sivaram, "How to Save Mission Innovation" (Berlin: Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/blog/how-save-mission-innovation> (accessed 13 April 2023).

⁷³ Daniel Sanchez and Varun Sivaram, "Saving Innovative Climate and Energy Research: Four Recommendations for Mission Innovation", *Energy Research & Social Science* 29 (2017): 123–26.

⁷⁴ Manuel Martin et al., "Feasibility of the 4 per 1000 Aspirational Target for Soil Carbon: A Case Study for France", *Global Change Biology* 27, no. 11 (2021): 2458–77.

⁷⁵ Pierre-Marie Aubert et al., *Implementing the "4 per 1000" Initiative: Contribution for the Establishment of a Reference/Normative Framework* (Paris: Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales, 2017).

⁷⁶ Jean-François Soussana et al., "Matching Policy and Science: Rationale for the '4 per 1000 – Soils for Food Secu-

spill-over effects for the implementation and evaluation methods developed as part of the initiative. However, initiatives such as 4 per 1000 do not address the fundamental obstacles to international climate cooperation, as these are usually not technical but political in nature. Where there are problems at the policy level that can be mitigated through technical exchange and coordination, such initiatives can help. Where divergent political interests are involved, they do not by themselves contribute significantly to the solution.

The G7 Climate Club

One of the most widely discussed initiatives of late is the climate club, which was proposed as part of the Germany's G7 presidency in 2022. A draft outline was published by the German government already in 2021.⁷⁷ This paper primarily proposes some ideas without elaborating upon them in detail. Nonetheless, three priorities can be derived. First, an explicit, joint minimum carbon price was planned. Second, in line with Nordhaus' club idea, substitutive imports from countries without a comparable carbon price were to be disincentivised by means of a border adjustment mechanism in order to prevent the mere shifting of emissions ("carbon leakage"), protect club members from competitive disadvantages, and set incentives for cooperation for non-members. Third, potential future members were to be supported in their efforts to meet membership conditions.

At first glance, the G7 appears to be a promising incubator for such an endeavour. It comprises a small, relatively homogeneous group of economically strong countries. However, it was clear from the very beginning that an explicit carbon price, for instance via an emissions trading system, would not be feasible to negotiate with countries such as the United

States⁷⁸ and Japan.⁷⁹ The Chancellor's Office, however, continued to push the idea, which originated in the Federal Ministry of Finance during the previous electoral term, and pursued it despite such obvious difficulties and open questions. The G7 partner countries did signal their interest in a joint platform for advancing climate cooperation. However, at the ministerial meetings in the run-up to the G7 summit in June 2022 at Elmau Castle, it became clear that the draft version would not be met with approval by the G7.⁸⁰ The consultations with partner countries in the run-up to the summit proved to be insufficient. Styling the initiative as a club also caused some irritation.

A key question for a club founded by a group of the world's richest countries concerns the inclusion of other countries. Being open to new members is an explicit goal of the club. This raises questions regarding the club benefits and membership conditions. Many developing and emerging countries are sceptical of carbon pricing.⁸¹ Moreover, the declared inclusivity revealed a dilemma. By definition, a club offers exclusive benefits to its members. If it wants to be inclusive at the same time, it runs the risk of losing any inherent advantages that are supposed to incentivise membership.

The negotiation process leading up to the G7 summit in Elmau did lead to an agreement, thanks to the flexibility during this phase. The club now consists of three pillars: policy coordination, industrial decarbonisation, and cooperation with third-party countries. Details, however, have yet to be finalised and will continue to be deliberated after the formal establishment of the club. As a result, the G7 Climate Club — originally conceived as an ambitious transformative ini-

ity and Climate' Initiative", *Soil and Tillage Research* 188 (2019): 3 – 15.

⁷⁷ Federal Ministry of Finance (BMF) et al., *Schritte zu einer Allianz für Klima, Wettbewerbsfähigkeit und Industrie. Eckpunkte eines kooperativen und offenen Klimaclubs* (Berlin, 2021), https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Downloads/Klimaschutz/eckpunkte-internationaler-klimaclub.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=6 (accessed 7 April 2022); Parul Kumar et al., *Perspectives on Designing a Climate Club. Alliance-building to Strengthen International Climate Cooperation* (Berlin: Epico and Macdonald-Laurier Institute, 2022).

⁷⁸ Only a few states in the United States have a carbon pricing system.

⁷⁹ Susanne Dröge and Marian Feist, *The G7 Summit: Advancing International Climate Cooperation? Options and Priorities for the German G7 Presidency*, SWP Comment 34/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C34.

⁸⁰ Group of Seven (G7), *Climate, Energy and Environment Ministers' Communiqué* (Berlin, 27 May 2022), https://www.bmu.de/fileadmin/Daten_BMU/Download_PDF/Europa___Internationalg7_climate_energy_environment_ministers_communique_bf.pdf (accessed 30 May 2022).

⁸¹ Susanne Dröge and Jan Steckel, "Klimaklub und Schwellenländer", *Frankfurter Rundschau* (online), 16 March 2022, <https://www.fr.de/meinung/gastbeitraege/klimaklub-und-schwellenlaender-91415041.html> (accessed 6 May 2022); Dröge and Feist, *The G7 Summit* (see note 79).

tiative — is now primarily a “forum for discussion”,⁸² a basis for negotiations whose ultimate effectiveness for climate action is still unknown. A high degree of flexibility may be one of the potential advantages of plurilateral cooperation, and it can have positive effects on the ownership of the countries involved. The open-endedness of the process would indeed lower barriers for undecided countries to join. However, in the trade-off between a smaller but more ambitious initiative on the one hand, and a larger but less focussed and impactful one on the other, the club has shifted considerable towards the latter. The G7 Climate Club is making the process of specifying its substance more difficult for itself by admitting new members. Having to negotiate the substance of the club with a larger number of players runs counter to the core idea of plurilateral initiatives, which is to find agreement more easily within a small circle.

The club falls far short of the expectations it had originally set for itself and, in the process, has taken up a lot of political resources

Reaching agreement required compromises at the expense of the desired level of policy stringency. In view of the economic power of the G7 countries, the coordination of common industrial standards that is now envisaged could potentially have an impact beyond the club members. However, the club falls far short of the expectations it had originally set for itself and, in the process, has taken up a lot of political resources. Moreover, the G7 is fundamentally a forum for exchange; the institutional consolidation of the club was therefore a challenge from the very beginning. An important question in this context was the extent to which Japan, which took over the G7 presidency from Germany in 2023, would be interested in continuing the project. To avoid this issue, the club’s terms of reference were rather hastily adopted in December 2022, drawing closely on the Elmau Declaration from July.⁸³ Here, too, compromises led to

further dilution. The outreach pillar, which encourages the club to cooperate with and support third-party countries, was recognisably characterised by a lower degree of commitment compared to the Elmau Declaration.⁸⁴ Japan has, in fact, not decisively moved forward with the club idea, so the German government has essentially continued its coordinating role.

Renewables Club

The Renewables Club shows how far back the idea for plurilateral formats goes, not just in academic debate but also in practice. The Renewables Club parallels the G7 Climate Club, which was founded about ten years later, in a number of aspects. Both emerged from a German initiative, were clubs only in the sense of being a small group (instead of offering club benefits to their members), and both have (so far) avoided providing clear definitions for themselves. There was also a question from the very beginning with regard to the Renewables Club as to what extent the initiative could offer any additional benefits compared to already existing formats.⁸⁵

The Renewables Club was founded in 2013 by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, which was in charge of international climate negotiations at the time. It was intended to provide a platform to advance the international energy transition (*Energiewende*), which was already being pursued at the national level in Germany. The Renewables Club was founded by the EU members Denmark, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom as well as China, India, Morocco, South Africa, Tonga, and the United Arab Emirates.⁸⁶

The agreed goals of the club were exceptionally vague.⁸⁷ Concrete instruments and club benefits were

club-data.pdf?download=1 (accessed 28 June 2022); G7, *Terms of Reference for the Climate Club* (see note 82).

⁸⁴ Parul Kumar, “The Way Forward for a Climate Club. How to Further Strengthen International Climate Cooperation” (Berlin, 2022), <https://epico.org/de/reflections-on-the-g7-terms-of-reference-for-the-climate-club> (accessed 13 December 2022).

⁸⁵ Andreas Mihm, “Koalition der Energiewende-Willigen”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (online), 1 June 2013, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/energiewende/altmaier-gruendet-renewables-club-koalition-der-energiewende-willigen-12204368.html> (accessed 6 April 2023).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit (BMU) et al., *Club der Energiewende-Staaten – Kom-*

⁸² G7, *Terms of Reference for the Climate Club* (Elmau, 12 December 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/974430/2153140/a04dde2adecf0ddd38cb9829a99c322d/2022-12-12-g7-erklarung-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed 12 December 2022).

⁸³ G7, *G7 Statement on Climate Club* (Elmau, 28 June 2022), <https://www.g7germany.de/resource/blob/974430/2057926/43099dc0d5bba6a5cdefca66c9114ec6/2022-06-28-g7-climate->

not specified. The institutional anchoring of the club was also unspecified. Accordingly, for China, India, and South Africa, the attractiveness of membership lay primarily in the economic importance of the participating EU countries.⁸⁸ Despite numerous public contributions to the debate at the time, which called for specifying an ambitious design for the club,⁸⁹ it was not implemented in a form that would have given it any notable lasting significance in international climate cooperation. Similarly to the G7 Climate Club, the substance of the Renewables Club needed to be sharpened and its mechanisms clearly specified so as not to appear to be a broad declaration of intent.

Just Energy Transition Partnerships

The diversity of plurilateral cooperation approaches in practice can be seen in the Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs). They occupy a special role simply because of the inherent asymmetry among members. Selected individual partner countries receive financial support to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels for energy production, especially coal, and to provide social protection to those who are most affected by the necessary changes in the economy (Just Transition⁹⁰). From the perspective of the recipient countries, whose energy sectors are usually particularly coal-dependent, this arrangement offers financial support for political and social challenges as well as the prospect of decarbonising their economic develop-

munique (Berlin, 2013), https://hans-josef-fell.de/wp-content/uploads/weitere-themenbereiche/club_communique_deutsch_final_bf.pdf (accessed 7 April 2023).

88 Jale Tosun, “Diffusion. An Outcome of and an Opportunity for Polycentric Activity?”, in *Governing Climate Change. Polycentricity in Action?* ed. Andrew Jordan et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 152–68, doi: 10.1017/9781108284646.

89 Dirk Messner, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, and Jennifer Morgan, “*Globale Wende durch Energiewende-Club*” (Bonn, 2014), <https://www.idos-research.de/die-aktuelle-kolumne/article/globale-wende-durch-energiewende-club/> (accessed 13 March 2023).

90 Peter Newell and Dustin Mulvaney, “The Political Economy of the ‘Just Transition’”, *The Geographical Journal* 179, no. 2 (2013): 132–40; Daniele Malerba, “Climate Change”, in *Handbook on Social Protection Systems*, ed. Esther Schüring and Markus Loewe (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021), 688–704, doi: 10.4337/9781839109119.00085; Dimitris Stevis, *Just Transitions. Promise and Contestation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

ment pathways.⁹¹ For contributing countries, on the other hand, the partnership enables them to implement emission reductions where it is most efficient to do so, and – in accordance with the principle of differentiated responsibilities and capacities⁹² – help ensure that the economic development of key emerging economies is compatible with the goals of the Paris Agreement.⁹³

Four such energy partnerships have been launched so far, all with Germany’s participation. The JETP with South Africa, which aims to mobilise US\$8.5 billion, was a particularly noteworthy outcome of the 2021 climate summit in Glasgow (COP 26).⁹⁴ France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the EU signed on to the partnership. This was followed by a partnership with Indonesia (US\$20 billion), announced at the G20 summit in Bali (which took place in parallel to COP 27), with the United States and Japan playing a coordinating role and the other G7 countries, Denmark, and Norway also represented.⁹⁵ This was followed by yet another partnership of the same countries with Vietnam (US\$15.5 billion).⁹⁶

91 Saliem Fakir, “The Just Transition Energy Partnership in South Africa. Vehicle for Reform and Economic Transformation?”, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 47, no. 1 (2023): 41–9.

92 United Nations, *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, June 1992, https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_CONF.151_26_Vol.I_Declaration.pdf (accessed 9 June 2023).

93 Jonathan Phillips et al., *Climate Finance for Just Transitions. Building Low-Carbon Development Pathways in an Age of US-China Rivalry*, Nicholas Institute Policy Brief, no. 22–18 (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2022).

94 Prime Minister’s Office, “Joint Statement: International Just Energy Transition Partnership” (London, 2 November 2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-international-just-energy-transition-partnership> (accessed 27 September 2022).

95 Bundesregierung, “Indonesien und internationale Partner verabreden wegweisende Klimaziele und entsprechende Finanzierung” (Berlin, 2022), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/975228/2142994/e7fe29101eefcd92a9f8f39f5f80c158/jetp-g20-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed 15 November 2022).

96 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, “Political Declaration on Establishing the Just Energy Transition Partnership with Viet Nam” (London, 14 December 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vietnams-just-energy-transition-partnership-political-declaration/political-declaration-on-establishing-the-just-energy-transition-partnership-with-viet-nam> (accessed 19 December 2022).

Lastly, an announcement was made in mid-2023 to launch a partnership between Senegal and France, Germany, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Canada (US\$2.5 billion).⁹⁷ The initial investment is expected to be followed by private investment to drive decarbonisation beyond the start-up phase, allowing the JETPs to develop further momentum.⁹⁸

However, an energy transition is an extremely complex undertaking.⁹⁹ The JETPs seem to be establishing themselves as a new key format for results-oriented climate cooperation. But the partnership with South Africa, the first of its kind, has already revealed some of the challenges. Firstly, at the national level, it has become clear that some stakeholders are critical of the move away from coal in electricity production in light of the potential economic and employment impacts.¹⁰⁰ These are precisely the issues that the Just Transition aspect of these partnerships are supposed to address. To be successful, JETPs must be customised to the partner countries and take into account local economic structures and the technical and legal particularities of the energy systems.¹⁰¹ This challenge becomes even greater in the case of India – another potential partner country – due to its size and pronounced federalism.

The JETPs reflect some of the common structural and procedural challenges in international climate cooperation. They are explicitly declared to be partnerships between equals. However, well-known asymmetries of interest between contributor and recipient

countries, which are common in international climate finance, are also evident here. Specifically, in the case of the partnership with South Africa, the main issue is over what financing instruments are to be preferred – subsidies or concessionary loans.¹⁰² Key issues such as this were initially excluded from the negotiations. This allowed for the presentation of the partnership with South Africa as an accomplishment during COP 26 in Glasgow. However, these issues now need to be addressed if the partnership is to proceed.

97 Présidence de la République, “Launch of a Just Energy Transition Partnership” (Paris, 22 June 2023), <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2023/06/22/launch-of-a-just-energy-transition-partnership> (accessed 22 June 2023).

98 Bundesregierung, “Indonesien und internationale Partner verabreden wegweisende Klimaziele und entsprechende Finanzierung” (see note 95).

99 Heiner von Lüpke et al., *International Partnerships for a Just Energy Transition. Findings from South Africa* (Berlin: German Institute for Economic Research, 2023); Emily Tyler and Lonwabo Mgoduso, *Just Energy Transitions and Partnerships in Africa. A South African Case Study* (Cape Town: Meridian Economics, 2022).

100 Lüpke et al., *International Partnerships for a Just Energy Transition* (see note 99).

101 Steffen Bauer and Marian Feist, “Just Energy Transition Partnerships. Boosting International Climate Cooperation?”, *Future of Globalisation* (Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability, 2022), <https://blogs.idos-research.de/2022/09/21/just-energy-transition-partnerships-boosting-international-climate-cooperation/> (accessed 1 November 2022).

102 S’thembele Cele and Loni Prinsloo, “Devil in Detail of South Africa’s \$8.5 Billion Climate Funding”, *Bloomberg* (online), 16 September 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-16/devil-in-detail-of-south-africa-s-8-5-billion-climate-funding> (accessed 19 December 2022); Antony Sguazzin et al., “A Landmark \$8.5 Billion Climate Finance Deal Hangs in the Balance”, *Bloomberg* (online), 3 October 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-03/south-africa-s-8-5-billion-climate-finance-deal-with-rich-donors-test-for-coal> (accessed 5 October 2022).

Practical implications for climate diplomacy

As a look at current and past phases of plurilateralism in international climate policy shows, the mere establishment of cooperation initiatives does not mean that their promises will be realised. Experiences with recent initiatives, in particular, have highlighted a number of implications for diplomatic practice that should be taken into account – especially in light of current challenges and developments – if plurilateral initiatives are to be used effectively for advancing international climate cooperation.

Credibility and prioritisation

Leading by example in climate action does not necessarily imply the ability to entice others to cooperate.¹⁰³ As the above examples have shown, there are considerable obstacles to negotiating incentives. Compromises that were meant to overcome these obstacles often dilute the initiative, undermining the very purpose of going small in the first place. As a result, plurilateral initiatives tend to fall short in practice in terms of tangible incentives for cooperation. Empirical evidence, including from recent examples, suggests that they often perform more of a coordinating function and that there is no immediate initiation of an emission reduction dynamic.¹⁰⁴ However, it is the explicit promise of plurilateral cooperation that it can make up for a lack of progress and effectively advance the implementation. Should prominent initiatives such as the G7 Club and the JETPs fall significantly short of expectations and promises, this will further impede the credibility

of international climate policy and weaken the already shaken trust on the part of developing countries. Nonetheless, developing countries and emerging economies must also ensure that their domestic circumstances are conducive to the successful implementation of international partnerships, as the recent example of the JETP with South Africa discussed above has shown.¹⁰⁵

Founding new plurilateral initiatives is in itself not necessarily a net gain for international climate cooperation.

Given the pressure to succeed in terms of credibility, there are questions regarding the prioritisation of climate diplomacy efforts. Limited institutional capacities are typically seen as an issue with regard to poorer, vulnerable countries¹⁰⁶ – for example in connection to international climate finance.¹⁰⁷ But capacities are not inexhaustible in developed countries either. This applies both to the coordination of actors, institutions, and processes at the national level and to efforts on the diplomatic stage. Delegations at climate negotiations have to prioritise among several issues and

¹⁰³ Busby and Urpelainen, “Following the Leaders?” (see note 52).

¹⁰⁴ Charlotte Unger and Sonja Thielges, “Preparing the Playing Field. Climate Club Governance of the G20, Climate and Clean Air Coalition, and Under2 Coalition”, *Climatic Change* 167, no. 3–4 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s10584-021-03189-8.

¹⁰⁵ Lüpke et al., *International Partnerships for a Just Energy Transition* (see note 99).

¹⁰⁶ Suriwan Thaiprayoon and Richard Smith, “Capacity Building for Global Health Diplomacy: Thailand’s Experience of Trade and Health”, *Health Policy and Planning* 30, no. 9 (2015): 1118–28; Caterina Carta and Richard Higgott, eds., *Cultural Diplomacy in Europe* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-21544-6; Maria E. Jarquin-Solis and Jean-Christophe Mauduit, “Institutional Capacity for Science Diplomacy in Central America”, *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics* 6 (2021): 663827.

¹⁰⁷ Jan Steckel et al., “From Climate Finance towards Sustainable Development Finance”, *WIREs Climate Change* 8, no. 1 (2017), doi: 10.1002/wcc.437; Rabah Arezki, “Climate Finance for Africa Requires Overcoming Bottlenecks in Domestic Capacity”, *Nature Climate Change* 11, no. 11 (2021): 888.

responsibilities — depending on staff capacities and the climate-related technical expertise available to them.¹⁰⁸ New plurilateral initiatives for international climate cooperation cannot be realised without drawing on these capacities. Founding new plurilateral initiatives is therefore in itself not necessarily a net gain for international climate cooperation.

Reforming existing initiatives instead is a highly political and lengthy process with uncertain prospects of success.¹⁰⁹ On the face of it, there may be an incentive to create a new plurilateral forum rather than to expand and develop an existing one. Moreover, the launching of a new initiative on the margins of a climate summit — as was seen in particular at COP 26 in Glasgow — can be presented as a political success and evidence of climate policy commitment. In order to ensure the existence of new alliances, however, it must be considered on which institutional framework they should be built and how the necessary resources can be secured in the long term.

Trust and communication

Trust among Parties that goes beyond procedural transparency and compliance mechanisms is an important factor in multilateral negotiations.¹¹⁰ As cumbersome as the UNFCCC processes are, their permanence has the virtue of allowing for the formation of familiarity among Parties that goes beyond formal compliance mechanisms.¹¹¹ New alliances do not offer the same degree of familiarity. In order to help plurilateral initiatives succeed and avoid exacerbating the credibility issue, it is essential to set the right expectations from the outset and to make suit-

able offers to partner countries that are in line with their interests and priorities.¹¹² It is also essential to anticipate the perceptions of partner countries. In the German government's outline for the G7 Climate Club, for example, the compensation of possible competitive disadvantages through carbon pricing was a key element (guaranteeing a “level playing field”).¹¹³ In the course of the process, however, this wording was excluded. Emphasising the benefits of mitigating economic risks for the G7 countries would have seemed rather self-serving from the perspective of partner countries.

Representation and legitimacy

The inclusion and consideration of the interests of developing countries is essential for the legitimacy of a perceived leadership role in international climate policy.¹¹⁴ Plurilateral initiatives must be perceived as complementary to the multilateral process, not in competition with it. Developing countries are particularly affected by climate change but, with the exception of large emerging economies, have cumulatively contributed little to it. This double inequality with inverse distribution of risk and responsibility¹¹⁵ is exacerbated by the fact that those countries also lack material bargaining assets. They are faced with the fundamental problem of negotiating with structurally stronger players.¹¹⁶ In practice, however, it turns out that structurally weaker negotiating partners can use the UN climate negotiations to their advantage, for example by forming coalitions or jointly building

108 Katja Biedenkopf and Franziska Petri, “EU Delegations in European Union Climate Diplomacy. The Role of Links to Brussels, Individuals and Country Contexts”, *Journal of European Integration* 41, no. 1 (2019): 47–63.

109 James Patterson, *Remaking Political Institutions. Climate Change and Beyond* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), doi: 10.1017/9781108769341.

110 Vogler, “The Institutionalisation of Trust in the International Climate Regime” (see note 33); Christoph Elhardt, “The Causal Nexus between Trust, Institutions and Cooperation in International Relations”, *Journal of Trust Research* 5, no. 1 (2015): 55–77; Clara Weinhardt, “Relational Trust in International Cooperation: The Case of North-South Trade Negotiations”, *Journal of Trust Research* 5, no. 1 (2015): 27–54.

111 Vogler, “The Institutionalisation of Trust in the International Climate Regime” (see note 33).

112 Dröge and Feist, *The G7 Summit* (see note 79); Busby and Urpelainen, “Following the Leaders?” (see note 52).

113 BMF et al., *Schritte zu einer Allianz für Klima, Wettbewerbsfähigkeit und Industrie* (see note 77).

114 Robyn Eckersley, “Rethinking Leadership. Understanding the Roles of the US and China in the Negotiation of the Paris Agreement”, *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 4 (2020): 1178–1202.

115 Sam Barrett, “Local Level Climate Justice? Adaptation Finance and Vulnerability Reduction”, *Global Environmental Change* 23, no. 6 (2013): 1819–29.

116 I. W. Zartman and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, “The Study of Power and the Practice of Negotiation”, in *Power and Negotiation*, ed. I. W. Zartman and Jeffrey Z. Rubin (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 3–28.

negotiating capacities.¹¹⁷ If the UNFCCC process — in view of the increased importance of plurilateral initiatives — plays a much smaller role in the future, especially regarding mitigation, vulnerable countries will be denied the limited but at least established opportunities for participation in this process to a certain extent. They can only represent their interests in initiatives that they are a part of. Plurilateral initiatives that serve to reduce the emissions of the largest emitters may comply with the UNFCCC principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR). However, to the extent that the focus of international climate policy is shifting from multilateral negotiations to smaller initiatives, there is the risk that the interests of particularly vulnerable countries will receive less attention. The issue that initiatives are often shaped by countries of the Global North has already become apparent in the G7 Climate Club¹¹⁸ and the *Glasgow Breakthrough Agenda*.¹¹⁹ Core issues for vulnerable countries are adaptation to climate impacts¹²⁰ and dealing with loss and damage,¹²¹ the latter of which played a key role at COP 27 in Sharm El Sheikh.¹²² Accordingly, the idea of plurilateral initiatives is viewed critically among diplomats with regard to their legitimacy.¹²³

This problem goes hand in hand with the frustration and loss of trust on the part of the vulnerable countries discussed above, and it threatens to exacerbate the situation. It is therefore all the more important to make clear the relationship of plurilateral

initiatives to the Convention and the principles enshrined therein. The principle of CBDR and country ownership must be respected.¹²⁴ Furthermore, parallel to the efforts in plurilateral climate diplomacy, commitments made and agreed processes must be adhered to, for example with regard to loss and damage finance and the Global Stocktake.¹²⁵ It is crucial that cooperation initiatives from the Global North are not seen as exclusive and contrary to the interests of countries in the Global South.¹²⁶

117 Carola Betzold, “‘Borrowing’ Power to Influence International Negotiations. AOSIS in the Climate Change Regime, 1990–1997”, *Politics* 30, no. 3 (2010): 131–48.

118 Dröge and Feist, *The G7 Summit* (see note 79).

119 Dworkin and Engström, *We’ll Always Have Paris* (see note 35).

120 UNEP, *Adaptation Gap Report 2022* (see note 19).

121 Anna Åberg and Nina Jeffs, *Loss and Damage Finance in the Climate Negotiations. Key Challenges and Next Steps*, Research Paper (London: Chatham House, 2022), doi: 10.5531/9781784135461; Steffen Bauer and Mariya Aleksandrova, “Loss and Damage. A Game Changer for Multilateral Climate Governance”, in *Annual Report 2021–2022*, ed. German Institute of Development and Sustainability (Bonn, 2023), 24–8.

122 Adeline Stuart-Watt, “Why COP27 Will Be Remembered As the Loss and Damage COP and What to Expect Next” (London, 2022), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/why-cop27-will-be-remembered-as-the-loss-and-damage-cop-and-what-to-expect-next/> (accessed 24 February 2023); Feist and Geden, *Climate Negotiations in Times of Multiple Crises* (see note 17).

123 Falkner et al., “Climate Clubs” (see note 45).

124 Kumar et al., *Perspectives on Designing a Climate Club* (see note 77).

125 Dröge and Feist, *The G7 Summit* (see note 79); Feist and Geden, *Climate Negotiations in Times of Multiple Crises* (see note 17).

126 Brozus et al., *Global Issues 2022* (see note 28).

Conclusions

In view of the recent developments in international climate politics, plurilateral initiatives are associated with the hope of overcoming existing obstacles and more effectively advancing the implementation of the Paris climate goals. To be sure, there are clear differences between individual initiatives in practice. In essence, however, there are usually three aspects involved. The comparatively smaller group of countries that wish to lead by example in climate action simplifies the agreement process considerably compared to the multilateral process. These conducive conditions, in turn, allow for raising the bar and agreeing on more ambitious goals and stringent measures. Ideally, incentives from within the initiative would have spill-over effects on non-members as well.

However, although plurilateral climate cooperation seems to offer a diplomatically feasible way forward, the promises of such a format do not automatically materialise. The negotiating of enforcement mechanisms often proves to be prohibitively difficult even in smaller cooperation formats, which in turn has implications for broader cooperation incentives and potential spill-over effects. Plurilateral cooperation initiatives can be important elements in the implementation of the Paris Agreement. In the right context, they offer a higher potential for political agreement. However, they are not a means to transcend the political challenges in international climate cooperation. For successful implementation, it is therefore crucial to keep an eye on the procedural challenges that need to be overcome so that agreement on implementation can also be reached with like-minded partners within the initiative.

To begin with, it is important to keep in mind that plurilateral cooperation does not necessarily imply that the multilateral process is somehow less crucial. In the draft structure for its climate diplomacy strategy (*Klimaaußenpolitikstrategie*), which is to be completed in the second half of 2023, the German government explicitly emphasises the goal of strengthening multilateralism. Neither is the German government interested in deprioritising the multilateral UN pro-

cess, nor would that be recommended. Rather, plurilateral initiatives should always be understood as a complementary component. The question of how to make multilateral cooperation more effective will become even more important in light of the increased attention on plurilateral forms of cooperation. It is essential to keep in mind the interests of partner countries, especially from the Global South – including those with which one does not cooperate equally intensively at the plurilateral level. In order for new alliances such as the JETPs to establish themselves as both effective and, in particular, politically feasible, vulnerable developing countries must not be given the impression that they will not receive further support from the developed countries due to the lack of a coal-based energy system to be decarbonised or for lack of global strategic or energy policy importance.

German and European climate diplomacy should focus on initiatives that are thematically focussed enough to be able to exploit the advantages of plurilateral cooperation within their specific framework. Often, the smaller format with a smaller number of members has the greater potential to effectively advance the implementation of the Paris Agreement in a way that is detached from the structural and acute challenges in international climate politics. The experience with the G7 Climate Club suggests that – similar to the experience with the Renewables Club – ambition and stringency on the one hand and openness and a high number of members on the other threaten to play off against each other. Initiatives that are broad in terms of membership and focus on joint target declarations, such as the Global Methane Pledge and Mission Innovation, can certainly have an important signalling effect and, in the right context, contribute to more effective coordination between the members. However, these will be undermined if it becomes clear that the targets are not being met – without any consequences for the member states. This would further exacerbate the credibility crisis in international climate politics that is already looming due to the compliance gaps in emission reductions.

Abbreviations

BMF	German Federal Ministry of Finance (Bundesministerium der Finanzen)
BMU	Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Reactor Safety (Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit)
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CBDR	Common But Differentiated Responsibilities
COP	Conference of the Parties
EU	European Union
G7	Group of Seven
JETP	Just Energy Transition Partnership
NDC	Nationally Determined Contribution
UN	United Nations
U.S.	United States
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

