

# Oxford Climate Policy Blog

Initiating debates on international climate policy

## AMBITION CYCLE ON COURSE TO LAND IN GLASGOW



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### Outcomes of the 2020 Technical Climate Dialogue on Common Time Frame(s)

**F**ive years ago, countries submitted their first Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Research institutions went to work calculating their net impact on emissions and their conclusions were unanimous: the NDCs were **not ambitious enough** to prevent catastrophic climate change.

In response to these conclusions, governments have come under considerable public pressure at home and globally to ratchet up the ambition of their initial NDCs. The 2020 Climate Ambition Summit on 12 December 2020 was meant to be a moment of truth with national leaders expected to announce enhancements in NDC ambition: 45 countries announced new, updated, or revised NDCs, yet the effect on overall ambition is likely to fall short of what is required, not least because several large emitters were conspicuous by their absence.

While the Paris Agreement allows Parties to adjust their existing NDC to enhance the level of ambition at any time (Article 4.11), it does not specify how often this should happen. There is only an indirect indication of this in Article 14.3, which calls for the outcomes of the five-yearly Global Stocktakes (GSTs) to inform Par-

ties in updating and enhancing their actions and support – suggesting that such updates and enhancements should take place every five years.<sup>[1]</sup> In a recent [LSE Commentary](#), Peter Betts, former EU and UK lead negotiator, notes: “The COP process is not perfect; but underlying its dramas and process fights are real perceived national interests: how should emissions reductions be shared, and who should be supported financially? ... A COP Decision reinforcing the need for five-yearly revision of NDCs could help.”

The Paris Agreement also stipulates that Parties will consider common time frames (CTF) for NDCs (Article 4.10), and a number of Parties have seen this as an opportunity to address this lack of periodic synchronised ambition enhancement. Agreement on the rules for CTF has, however, proven tricky and was not possible in Katowice in 2018, or in Madrid the following year. (Agreement was also not possible on the rules for Article 6 and transparency, both of which are closely tied to the operationalisation of the CTF). While the postponement of the 2020 Climate Conference (COP26) has further delayed the adoption of these rules, negotiators have been working on the sidelines to ensure that they can hit the tracks running when COP26 takes place, currently scheduled for 2021.

CTF was, therefore, a key element for discussion at the virtually held [2020 UN Climate Change Dialogues](#), where a [technical dialogue](#) on the issue took place on 2 December 2020. The interventions during the Dialogue revealed some important points:

- The issue of CTF is important for the full synchronisation and effectiveness of the mechanisms of the Paris Agreement, such as NDC communication, GSTs, and the enhanced transparency framework.
- The technical discussion underlying the well-known negotiating options over the past negotiation sessions have been thorough and exhaustive.
- A decision will require consideration and possible adjustments of national policy cycles and national requirements.
- Agreement on a decision on CTF at COP26 will signal a strong commitment by Parties to find workable solutions, conclude the Katowice rule book, and move to full implementation of the Paris Agreement.
- A solution to CTF is not difficult and a workable approach can be found;
- Parties are willing to consider the utility of the “[Glasgow Ambition Cycle](#)” proposal, taking into account the issues highlighted regarding the implications of not arriving at a decision.
- The issue has matured to the point where Parties are ready and willing to arrive at a decision at COP26.
- A decision on CTF ought to be part of the package of decisions at COP 26.

Parties are clearly willing to explore options outside of their individual and group positions towards a solution in Glasgow. The positive nature of the discussions seems to suggest that notwithstanding the need to consider national circumstances and requirements, a decision on CTF, against the background of the three main negotiating options, is not only possible, but achievable, and that its time has come. The discussions also revealed that the landing zone for such a decision may be in sight: “The proposed Ambition Cycle can unite all the options on the table in a way that retains all their advantages, while avoiding the significant risks they pose on their own.”<sup>[2]</sup>

## Dialogue Report

## I. The Opening

The *Technical Dialogue on Common Time Frames for Nationally Determined Contributions referred to in Article 4, paragraph 10 of the Paris Agreement* was convened by Marianne Karlsen, the Chair of the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI). It was chaired by the lead author of this post, Kishan Kumarsingh; and included a presentation by second author Benito Müller. Kumarsingh invited the 73 Party participants in the Dialogue to focus on two questions:

- What approach to CTF will allow all of the processes and mechanisms of the Paris Agreement to function as intended?
- From your perspective, what are the most important factors to consider in arriving at a practical and workable time frame of an NDC, and how can these factors be accommodated in a solution on common time frames?

This was followed by a [presentation](#) by Yamide Dagnet, World Resources Institute (WRI), on the importance of an agreement on CTF in 2021. Dagnet said agreement on this issue will allow the GST, the Article 6 market mechanisms, and the enhanced transparency framework of the Paris Agreement to function as intended. She noted that Parties still have some way to go to reach the 1.5°C threshold recommended by the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The Paris Agreement calls for the communication of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) every five years, and for the NDCs to be enhanced on the basis of GSTs occurring also every five years. This enhancement on the basis of the emissions gap, the adaptation and resilience deficit, and the alignment of financial flows, will allow the “arc of ambition” to get closer to achieving the Paris Agreement’s long-term goals.

The NDCs and the GSTs are therefore at the heart of the arc of ambition, Dagnet said, and of the Paris Agreement’s ambition cycle. A decision on CTF can facilitate ambition by accelerating action at an established rhythm. If Parties have different timeframes, she said the GST will not be able to equitably reflect progress on action and support when countries are at different points in their NDC cycle. Some Parties will be concluding their NDC implementation, while others will be in the middle of implementation when the GST occurs, and this will clearly complicate the assessment of aggregate progress.

Dagnet said ensuring that all Parties are at the same point of their NDC cycle is important to ensure that the GST can consider collective progress in light of the best available science and equity, as required under Article 14.1 of the Paris Agreement.

If Parties have a ten-year timeframe, she continued, they will not be able to make the most of the GSTs, to reflect the achievements of NDCs and boost future climate actions and support. The Paris Agreement is already built on a five-year cycle.

Describing the linkages between CTF and Article 6, Dagnet noted that the market mechanisms of the Paris Agreement will be more complex than those of the Kyoto Protocol, and securing a robust measurement, reporting, and verification (MRV) system will be challenging in the first place, especially for many developing countries. The setting is made even more complex by the variety of NDC types, and the lack of certainty and predictability of markets. If the period of NDC implementation is different between Parties participating in the market mechanisms, this will add another layer of complexity. The impact of the use of those mechanisms on global efforts may not be clear for as long as ten years. Enforcing Article 6 principles of environmental integrity and the avoidance of double counting will become even more difficult.

Dagnet said a five-year “plan-implement-review” cycle at the national level will allow for a better understanding and acceleration of collective progress towards the Paris Agreement goals; allow for taking into account the outcome of the GST every five years; and be more responsive to technological, economic, and societal changes, needs, and opportunities. She noted that countries are already adjusting their governance and institutional structures accordingly.

She concluded that in the current state of climate emergency, Parties cannot wait beyond COP26 in Glasgow to come to an agreement on the CTF issue.

Benito Müller, Oxford Climate Policy, then gave a presentation on “[Status Quo Risks and how to deal with them](#)”.

He pointed to two papers<sup>[3]</sup> that have looked at the risks of not coming to an agreement on the CTF issue in Glasgow. Noting that the majority (80%) of initial NDCs communicated by Parties in 2015 have a time frame up to 2030, he recalled that the Paris Decision (§24) requests the Parties in question to communicate or update these NDCs by 2020, and do so every five years thereafter. He also noted that the Article 4.9 five-yearly communication requirement applies even to Parties with a ten-year timeframe.

In 2023, a GST will take place, which will be able to take into account forward-looking information for the NDCs up to 2030. For the countries that in 2025 choose to communicate a new NDC, the new NDC will be up to 2040. For those who choose to update their 2030 NDC, however, there will be “a cliff edge of information” in 2030, and the forward-looking 2028 GST would be meaningless because there is no information beyond two and a half years.

These countries would then present a new NDC up to 2040 in 2030, but that would not be informed by the GST. This clearly suboptimal situation will arise every ten years thereafter.

Müller then considered the implications of this cycle on the financial mechanism. In 2020, he said, information is available up to 2030, but the vintage of this information is 15 years, since the NDCs were communicated in 2015. This is too distant, particularly for the needs of contingent NDCs. The first replenishment of the Green Climate Fund (GCF) has just taken place, and the 2030 NDC will be updated now (in 2020). The eighth replenishment of the Global Environment Facility (GEF8), the second GCF replenishment, and GEF9 will be reasonably placed in terms of forward-looking information about financial needs. According to Plan

A, the 2030 NDCs will be re-updated in 2025, which will mean that GEF10 will be a cliff edge, with no forward-looking information whatsoever, and the same will happen for the GCF's sixth replenishment.

Müller then introduced the “[Glasgow Ambition Cycle](#)” (GAC) and demonstrated how it could mitigate these risks. In 2020, he said, we will have the 2030 NDCs communicated. The first step in the GAC is that Parties would communicate a 2035 NDC by 2025 (see Box 1), so the information horizon would be till 2035 in 2025, and avoid the cliff edge. The 2023 GST will have information at two levels – for 2030, and 2035.

*For a more detailed formulation, see [‘A Glasgow Ambition Cycle’](#)*

The second part of the GAC is that in 2025, Parties are requested to update their 2030 NDCs, and then do the same thing every five years. So for the second iteration, they will be invited or requested to communicate their 2040 NDC by 2030; and to update the 2035 one in 2030, and so forth. This will create a rolling cycle with NDCs updated every five years. He then showed how in this scenario, every single replenishment will be covered in terms of forward-looking information.

Müller said the GAC also creates space for equity. Parties will communicate their 2035 NDCs by 2025, there will be a GST in 2028, and an update in 2030. The five years between 2025-2030 will provide an important space to governments and civil society to consider the adequacy, but also the equity and fairness of contributions. While there is no way to impose fairness, the GAC will at least create the essential time and the space to discuss it, by making everything transparent. A more equitable sharing of ambition will, in turn, maximize the enhanced ambition.

Müller concluded that GAC can unite all the options on the table in a way that retains all their advantages, while avoiding the significant risks they pose on their own. The solution is simple – if countries can do a 2035 NDC, that is all that is required. If Parties want to communicate at 2040 NDC in 2025, they can do both, as it doesn't take more effort to have a 2035 NDC in addition to a 2040 NDC.

## II. Party Interventions

**H**ow did Parties react to the GAC idea as discussed in the kick-off presentations? What did they say as regards to whether there should be a single CTF or several, and to whether this should be decided at COP 26 in Glasgow?

### a) Reactions to the Glasgow Ambition Cycle (GAC)

The [Glasgow Ambition Cycle](#), originally called ‘Dynamic Contribution Cycle’ and submitted to the UNFCCC by [Brazil](#) in November 2014, was resubmitted as position of the [LDC Group](#) in April 2018, and as part of ‘Option 8’ in the SBI negotiations by Switzerland at COP 25 in November 2019.<sup>[4]</sup>

So when **Switzerland** took the screen on behalf of the EIG, and subsequently Bangladesh on behalf of the LDCs, it was good to hear that they remain fully in support of the GAC.

Switzerland, supporting the ‘5 + indicative 5’ version of the GAC, argued that this “allows more ambition through a functioning ratcheting-up mechanism.” Moreover, she put forward that “bearing in mind how fast new technologies are being developed, and the increasing pace of the transformation of various sectors, it would be a missed opportunity, in our view, not to give ourselves the opportunity to update our plans and strategies on a regular basis.”

**Zimbabwe**, speaking on behalf of the African Group of Negotiators (AGN), also endorsed the GAC idea,<sup>[5]</sup> building on a [2018 AGN submission](#), and highlighting the importance of providing space for equity mentioned in Müller’s presentation. Supporting the AGN intervention, **South Africa** stressed that “in a climate emergency, we need to do as much as possible as fast as possible and dynamically,” citing the danger of otherwise locking-in low ambition.

**Panama**, speaking on behalf of the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC), also explicitly supported the GAC “to enable the ambition mechanism of the Paris Agreement to operate in a manner that guides all Parties to the greatest possible ambition” by providing “regular opportunity for the latest scientific, technical, and stocktaking information, and the outcome of the Global Stocktake to directly inform subsequent NDC commitments in as timely a manner as possible” and by giving “citizens, companies, investors, and the international community clear visibility of the direction of travel the country is embarking upon.”

**Sweden**, speaking on behalf of the EU, informed participants that they do not presently have a preferred option, apart from NDCs being “communicated five years ahead of the start of its implementation” (which is perfectly compatible with the GAC), and that they are “very interested in hearing Parties’ views” at the Dialogue.

**Belize** reminded the audience that the different options on the table may be preferred for different reasons (preference for raising ambition every five years, or for having longer, ten-year implementation periods), but concluded that “it may be time that we start to meet each other in the middle, and try to find an option that gives everyone what they’re looking for.”

## **b) The Mandate issue, and how the GAC can resolve the differences.**

None of the interventions explicitly rejected the GAC idea, but one issue did divide opinion, namely whether the mandate for the CTF negotiations is to find a single time frame common to all; or whether it allows for multiple time frames (common to some) to be applied as they are at present.

**China**, on behalf of the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs), supported by **Saudi Arabia**, on behalf of the Arab Group, endorsed the former interpretation, while **Belize**, for example, said the Alliance of Small

Island States (AOSIS) believes “there should be a common time frame for all Parties going forward”, and suggested removing the ‘s’ and start referring to ‘a common time frame’.

As a matter of fact, we need to do neither to accommodate all sides. The LMDC proposal, as stated by China, is that “in 2025, the 2035 target and also the 2040 target are all allowed as target year to be communicated.” China also stressed that the LMDCs support “a very inclusive arrangement,” instead of “closing the door for 10 years as one of the options”.

As emphasised at the very end of the OCP presentation, the proposed GAC language (Box 1) does not prohibit anyone from communicating a 2040 NDC in 2025. All they need to do is to also communicate a 2035 one. It is in this manner that the GAC proposal can, as noted by **Switzerland**, “accommodate both the preference for a five-year and the preference for a ten-year NDC, while preserving the ratcheting up mechanism, which is at the heart of the Paris Agreement, and is really crucial if we want to safeguard ambition.”

### **c) Decision in Glasgow**

SBI Chair Marianne Karlsen said in her opening remarks that is her “intention and profound hope” that the informal exchanges during the Climate Dialogue will add value to Parties’ continued deliberations so that when formal negotiations are resumed at the next SBI session, Parties “are well prepared to navigate this to a landing at COP 26.”

“Resolving this outstanding issue as soon as possible would help to unleash the full potential of the Paris Agreement,” concurred Huw Davies, on behalf of the COP 26 Presidency, in his closing remarks. “We’re keen to support Parties and Marianne the SBI Chair however we can come to an agreement on this issue by COP 26, and we’ll continue to work closely with the SBI Chair over the coming months.”

While not all participants addressed this issue in their interventions, of the four who did raise it, three were clearly for, and the fourth one consistent with having a CTF decision as part of the key Glasgow outcome package (see Box 2).

[1] Note that Article 4.9 requires Parties to communicate an NDC every five years, and equally requires the preparation of the NDCs to be informed by the GST.

[2] K. Kumarsingh, "[Climate ambition still hangs in the balance](#)", ecbi BRIEF, November 2020.

[3] B. Müller and K. Kumarsingh, "[The risks of not adopting a Paris Agreement Ambition Cycle at COP 26 in Glasgow](#)" OCP Blog, 31 August 2020. K. Kumarsingh, "[Climate ambition still hangs in the balance](#)", ecbi BRIEF, November 2020.

[4] "2. Requests all Parties to communicate by 2025 a nationally determined contribution with a starting point of 1 January 2031 and a time frame up to 2035, and to do so every five years thereafter."

[5] The "period of implementation should be five years, and successive NDCs should be communicated five years in advance of the beginning of the period of applicability"

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[<http://blog.oxfordclimatepolicy.org/ambition-cycle-on-course-to-land-in-glasgow/>] by Benito Muller.

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