

Oxford Climate Policy Blog

Initiating debates on international climate policy

Good COP? Bad COP? Time to reform COP!

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It is three decades since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change came into force in March 1994. Having witnessed most of the subsequent annual *Conferences of the Parties* (COPs), the recent Dubai COP28 was a reason for both concern and delight.



To see over 80,000 participants in the UN “Blue Zone” (with **many more in the adjacent host-country “Green Zone”**) and 150 heads of state (see ‘family photo’) at the largest climate event ever held did, on the one hand, lead us to the concern whether this sort of scale was not ultimately detrimental to the objective of a COP. On the other, it was a delight to witness the enthusiasm, and the global and diverse involvement of so many stakeholders from civil society, business, youth, indigenous peoples, philanthropy, and international organizations. Yet, overall we couldn’t help asking ourselves whether this may be time to take a step back and examine how best to maximize the benefit from this enthusiasm without creating detrimental side-effects.

Formally, “COP” refers to the negotiation sessions of the governing bodies of the multilateral climate treaties. However, it now refers, at least informally, not just to the negotiations, but to a whole package of co-located diverse events and activities, among them:

[A] “**Negotiations**”: We use this term here to refer to sessions of the three governing bodies established by the three treaties: the Conference of the Parties (COP) which is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention, the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP), and the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement

(CMA), as well as their Subsidiary Bodies.

[B] **“Summits”**: Meetings of heads of state and government, which originally took place only to celebrate “treaty COPs” (Kyoto, Copenhagen, and Paris), but which since 2021 (Glasgow COP 26) have been taking place annually.

[C] **“Climate Expos”**: This is our term for the wide range of climate action events in the multilateral “Blue Zone” and the host country “Green Zone”. The latter is the space for non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and civil society to advocate, showcase innovations, and create alliances and collaborations to support implementation. This broadly construed “Expo” of late also includes the ever-increasing number of Pavilions (paid for and hosted by Parties and others).

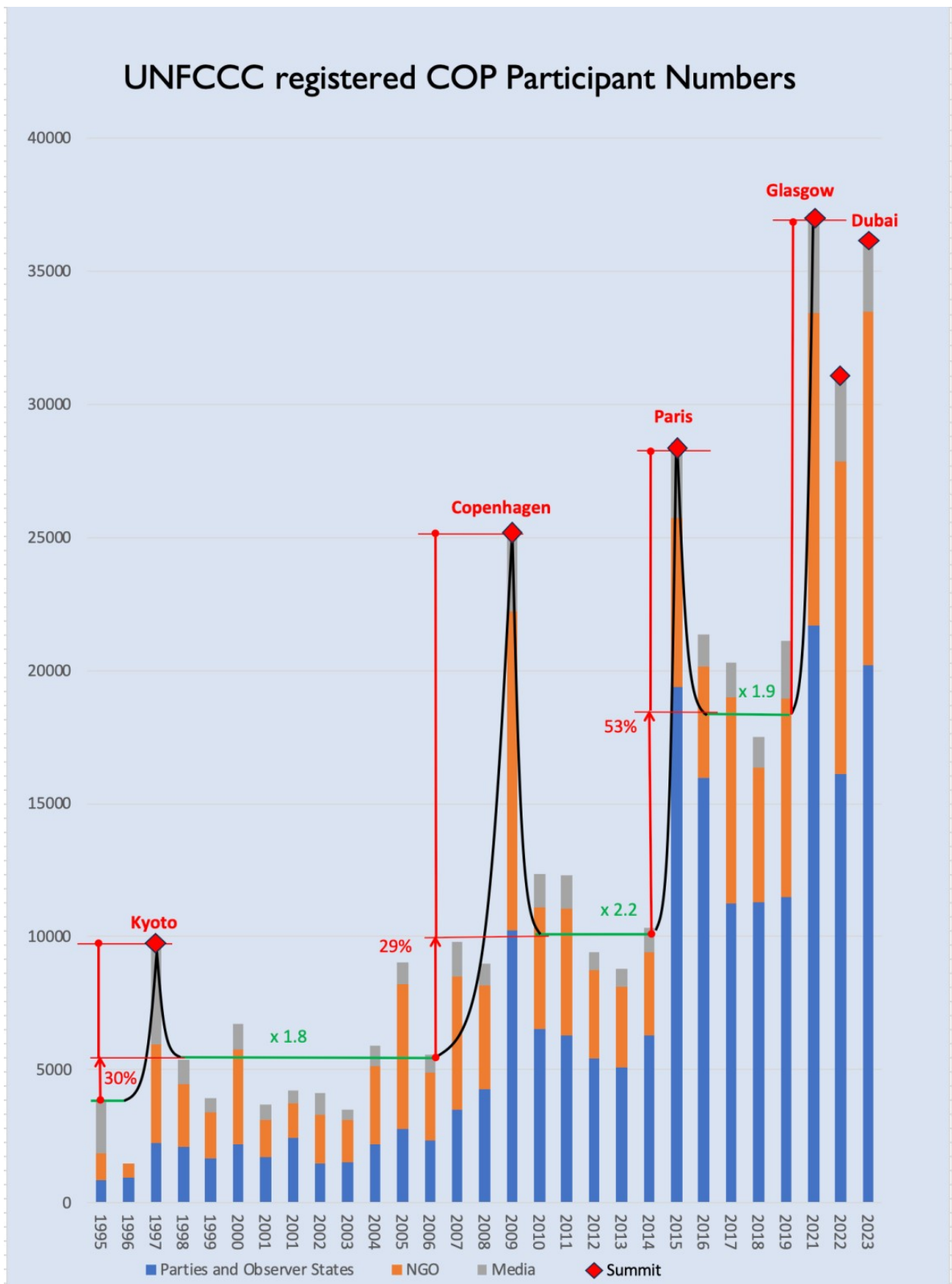


Figure 1 *Quo Vadis COP?* (extended to COP 28)

According to the [Final List of Participants](#), the total number of Blue Zone participants at COP28 was 83,884 of which 20,204 were (Party) negotiators. Non-governmental observer organizations, whose number is capped, fielded 13,278 participants, while media outlets sent 2,673. However, these three categories (depicted in Fig. 1) made up less than half of the Blue Zone badges issued. The rest (see Fig. 2) consisted of international Agencies (2469), technical and support staff (19,370), and the largest contin-

gent: overflow badges (24,890, 96% of which Party Overflow) allowing access to the Blue Zone but not necessarily the negotiations.

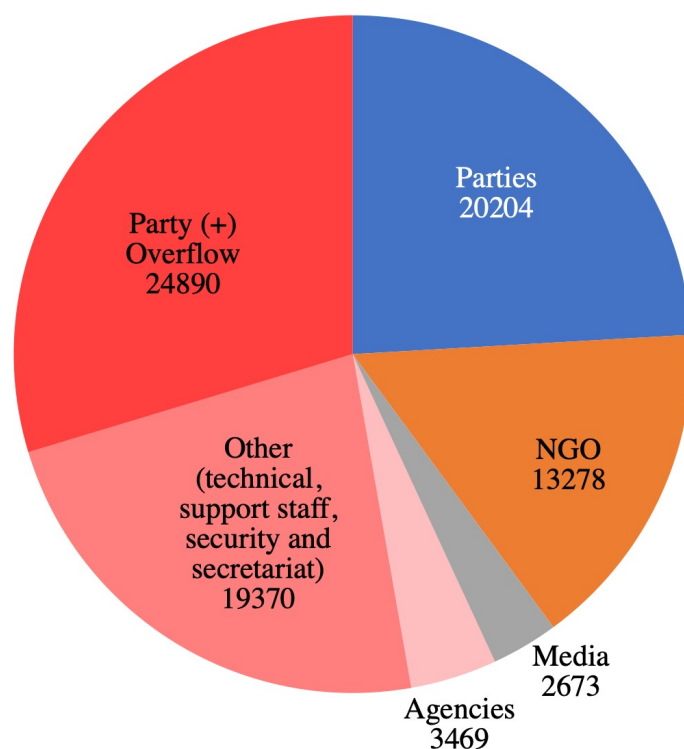


Figure 2: Total final (in person) participant numbers COP 28

What are the driver behind the extraordinary growth depicted in Fig. 1? As demonstrated in a 2021 [ecbi Policy Report](#), COPs have not been growing because of the negotiation agenda which has been growing roughly at the same pace in both mid-year SBs and subsequent COPs. The SBs can actually be regarded as the benchmark for negotiations in the absence of the exogenous factors driving the (negotiator) numbers of the COPs which have over time decoupled from those of the preceding mid-year Subsidiary Bodies (SB) sessions: COP 4 (1998) saw 3 times, and COP 23 (2017) 5 times the preceding SB negotiator attendance. This already large multiplier has since further increased, with COP 28 seeing more than 10 times the number of negotiators relative to SB 58 in June 2023.

We are currently updating our 2021 Report and will be analysing, *inter alia*, the reasons for this growth decoupling. The 2021 Report identified the following drivers:

- **Summit nature of event** (both directly through support staff, and likely also indirectly through officials from that country not wanting to be absent in the presence of their leader/minister).
- **Growth tends to be driven by a few very large delegations, not due to every delegation growing at the same rate.**
- **Presence of officials from many different ministries/units of government.** Different ministries/units tend to send several officials when they participate, so any additional ministry being part of the delegation tends to add another team rather than single key individuals and these tend to remain in the delegations in subsequent years.

We argued that the beginning of a new phase in global negotiations on climate change, now focused on the implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement, would have a major impact on the role and functioning of the various components of the COPs listed above ([A], [B], [C]). The solution, the Report suggested, is to decentralize the various components. This decentralization involves, in particular, the following disaggregation of the above-mentioned current ‘COP elements’:

- **Negotiations:** to be held (purely as sessions of the relevant bodies) in Bonn at the World Conference Center (where the capacity is 5,000 participants), following the model of the mid-year session of the Subsidiary Bodies.
- **Global Climate Action Weeks** (“Climate Expos”) to take place in the Region holding the rotating COP Presidency (but not necessarily in the country of the Presidency). Regional Climate Weeks to be held as usual in the other regions.
- **Climate Summits**, to be held (if possible only in special years when political leadership is required) in the COP Presidency region or Geneva (UN HQ).

We believe such a decentralized format can be more targeted to the functions of each of the three components of the regime identified above. But more of this in our updated ecbi Policy Brief (forthcoming October 2024).

This entry was posted in Uncategorized on 10 February 2024 [<https://blog.oxfordclimatepolicy.org/good-cop-bad-cop-time-to-reform-cop/>] by Benito Muller.

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