

ARTICLE

The Failure of Climate Dialogue: Why Global South Voices Must Be Climate Talk Leaders

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Abstract

This article argues that, as they are currently designed, UN climate talks fail to address the environmental catastrophe they aim to address. While dialogue is the primary means through which the world's population can get together, discuss the scope and nature of the problem, and put appropriate measures into action, these talks are, year after year, employed as a way to create the illusion that democratic decision-making occurs. As a result, these kinds of events can only succeed in entrenching positions, exacerbating the impasse at which we currently find ourselves. This, in turn, solidifies the notion that we indeed need to engage in a dialogue about climate change, thus perpetuating a never-ending cycle that protects, under the veneer of planetary engagement, the continuation of capitalist business as usual. The article, therefore, proposes that a dialogic path to finding a solution to the climate catastrophe can only be successful if climate talks are rethought, placing at the helm voices from the most affected populations in the Global South. Otherwise, these talks will continue to fail in making a significant change that ensures the possibility of an environmentally just and viable future for the planet.

Keywords: climate change; climate talks; dialogue; environmentalism; Global South

Every year, the United Nations (UN) holds a Conference of the Parties (COP) to assemble representatives from across the planet and find solutions to the destructive consequences of the climate breakdown. In attending to one of the most urgent planetary problems, the COP meetings embody a crucial element of humans' collective existence: their ability to engage in dialogue to address a common issue. Without dialogue, communities—including the global one—cannot thrive, as many have theorized. Most notably among those theorists is Mikhail Bakhtin, who in the early twentieth century coined the term “dialogism” to encapsulate the spirit of a multiplicity of voices coming together and expressing differing points of view (giving rise to what he called “heteroglossia”).¹ Others have also theorized this question with more or less explicit discussions of dialogue, from Hans-Georg Gadamer's dialogical theory of interpretation and Paulo Freire's understanding of dialogue's power in pedagogical environments to Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere as mediated by the interaction of its members.² Dialogue is a fundamental pillar of democracy. And as we

¹ Bakhtin 1982, 271.

² Gadamer 1980; Habermas 1989; Freire 2000.

await to see the full range of phenomena emerging from a changing climate, without dialogue, the future of life on this planet will be dangerously jeopardized.

While we should celebrate accomplishments stemming from interparty talks such as the signature of the Paris Agreement, which set the goal that temperatures should not surpass 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, the prospect of an ongoing climate dialogue where meaningful solutions can be formulated has been eroded for some time—and the COP meetings are symptomatic of this issue.³ The crux of this question is the fact that dialogue, at the moment, is simultaneously the only way to find an effective solution and the very reason we cannot reach one.

On the surface, we can only hope that these talks continue to be held every year. Their disappearance as a major yearly event attracting the world's attention would be disastrous. Yet voices continue to raise concerns both that what is agreed in the latest round of talks is never enough and that the path forward always falls short. For instance, COP28, which took place in Dubai in 2023, was described when it concluded as one of “winners and losers,” where the “[v]ulnerable and developing nations” would bear the brunt of the environmental havoc we are only beginning to experience, which has been centuries in the making.⁴ This outcome, which is often represented as “business as usual,” cannot be taken as anything other than a failure. Until there are no losers, no victory can be declared in this planetary fight. Immediately after the COP26 talks in Glasgow two years before, many had expressed the same sentiment, given that a realistic plan of action was never proposed in its resolution. As the activist Greta Thunberg said, “The #COP26 is over. Here’s a brief summary: Blah, blah, blah.”⁵ The problem, however, is not simply that COP meetings lead to no significant changes because they are all talk and no action; in fact, as Naomi Klein has reported, they have “not only failed to make progress” but, year in year out, they have also “overseen a process of virtually uninterrupted backsliding” where the agents of “corporate globalization” continue “zooming from victory to victory.”⁶ That is why, if they are truly intended to address the climate emergency, COP events will not cease to fail to address the inequalities baked into the issue because their very frame of operation is indeed flawed.

A good-faith approach requires rethinking the dynamics governing climate talks and, crucially, the idea of dialogue at their core. We live in an era in which discussion and deliberation often become absorbed into an “illusory dialogue” that projects a “spectacle of tolerance ... designed precisely to prevent any meaningful change from occurring.”⁷ The democratic veneer of anything resembling a dialogue precedes its outcome, which then becomes an afterthought precisely because of the self-congratulatory feeling of having engaged in what looked like a dialogue. This is what has led to the pervasive and uncritical celebration of dialogue as a vehicle for the inclusion of all views, a superficial display of tolerance. In reality, it is often simply a rhetorical exercise defanged of any power to make things better. In the context of COP talks, a solution to the catastrophe is currently not the most important thing; it is the fact that a dialogue was held about it. Therefore, climate talks need to be fundamentally reenvisioned if we truly want them to serve the purpose of

³ “7. d Paris Agreement” 2015.

⁴ Dennis 2023.

⁵ Atkinson 2021.

⁶ Klein 2014, 11, 19.

⁷ In *Resisting Dialogue*, which I wrote precisely because of the absence of critical discourse on this nefarious use of dialogue, I argue that this has been the case for at least a century. Meneses 2019, 4.

addressing the climate emergency. This reenvisioning can be done on the basis of two central points.

First, we must address the issue of how a dialogue is arranged, and specifically who has a seat at the table. COP talks are increasingly undermined by the presence of capitalist interests. For instance, the 2023 COP meeting had a “record number of fossil fuel lobbyists” who were doubtlessly crucial in leaving the agreement “without teeth.”⁸ This seems to be the direction the process is being taken into by design. Even before the COP meeting in 2024 took place, the host of that year’s talks declared that “[w]ithout the private sector, there is no climate solution.”⁹ This is a blatant stacking of the deck that cannot simply be admitted as yet another anecdote in the fight against climate breakdown. Slowly but surely, the field is being flooded with interested parties that have aims other than guaranteeing that living a good life on this planet is possible. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres said, “The 1.5C limit is only possible if we ultimately stop burning all fossil fuels. Not reduce, not abate. Phase out, with a clear timeframe.”¹⁰ This means that as long as parties representing commercial interests are allowed to participate in any discussions, these efforts can only be considered a sham. Lobby politics has no place in this matter, and the fossil fuel industry in particular—but also the mining, meat, electronics, and so many other industries—must not be allowed to take part in the negotiations and push their agendas under the pretext that “everyone must be heard.” This will only ensure that the Capitalocene, the term employed by Jason W. Moore and others to describe how capitalist activity has given rise to a new planetary epoch, will be endlessly extended into the future.¹¹

The next urgent question is concerned with the political nature of climate talks. By any measure, the Global North has been historically responsible for the rise of the climate disaster, no less by converging modern industrialization with the colonization of overseas territories.¹² How can, then, COP meetings be truly democratic if, in establishing that all participants must have a say, the biggest contributors to the climate breakdown play a key role in determining the resulting policies and recommendations? The sooner we realize that not all parties must have equal power in the collective decision-making, the sooner will we be able to set a true plan of action. Otherwise, what looks like a fair distribution of power will inevitably replicate a historical dynamic appearing, as Marx would put it, “the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”¹³ The great anticolonial theorist Frantz Fanon would denounce this in the early postcolonial period as a continuation of the state of affairs in the name of a “compromise” that failed to “break ties with colonialism.”¹⁴ Later, this dynamic would be cemented via the imposition of neoliberal structural reform on formerly colonized nations, as Richard Peet has traced in his work on what he calls the global “unholy trinity” of financial global relations.¹⁵ With its deep roots in European imperialism, the Global North continues to this day to dictate how the world must conduct itself.

⁸ Lakhani 2023; Gerhardt 2023.

⁹ Harvey 2024.

¹⁰ Carrington and Stockton 2023.

¹¹ Moore 2015.

¹² Some argue that Christopher Columbus’ arrival in America in 1492 is the original event that kickstarted the disastrous environmental circumstances under which we currently live. Others contend that it was rather the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century (often still connected to the history of colonialism). For a discussion on this question, see Bonneuil and Fressoz 2017.

¹³ Marx 1978, 594.

¹⁴ Fanon 2004, 24.

¹⁵ Peet 2009.

Taking as inspiration the classic work of Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier, I argue that the leaders in future climate talks must be representatives of the poorest parts of the Global South.¹⁶ As many have pointed out, the term “Global South” is at times an inadequate descriptor. Critics have noted that it foregrounds a (nonetheless historically inflicted) geographical approach that tends to gloss over capitalocentric activities in non-Western countries. Yet, as Alfred López has argued, the term can be critically deployed to describe “a global subaltern” population “that increasingly recognizes itself as such” and whose “marginalized subjectivity and agency” are determined by an experience of “globalization from the bottom.”¹⁷ Indeed, some Global South countries are routinely complicit in turning COP meetings into talks that effectively lead to no change—most prominently among them are petrostates seeking to extend our current dependency on fossil fuels. This is why I insist on nominating the poorest in that general region as climate dialogue leaders. And this is not only because the pain is already being inflicted on the wretched of the earth and letting them spearhead the effort is the right thing to do. Even if countries in the Global North are motivated exclusively by selfish reasons, they should look at the future under the unequivocal assumption that the climate emergency will make no distinctions; the rest of the world will surely follow.

Indigenous and minority populations in the most disadvantaged regions have already begun experiencing climate change’s most severe consequences, with islands under water, crops disrupted, mass displacement caused by drought, and more. While the Global North can (for now) keep the realities of the climate’s breakdown at a distance, it is the richest countries that continue to play the most important role in prolonging the situation we find ourselves in. A fair framing of climate dialogue, then, would entail the adjustment of countries’ and communities’ power in the decision-making process in relation to who is most affected, on the one hand, and who is responsible for it, on the other. The question, therefore, is not that everyone must have a voice, but that representation is administered legitimately and justly. Those who have done the least to create the current planetary circumstances yet disproportionately suffer the most from them must be at the helm of any and all climate talks. Only then will future dialogue succeed in “bell[ing] the cat of imposing ecological adjustments on the North.”¹⁸ Before concluding, I want to offer a few more concrete suggestions that might be considered to chart a path forward within this framework.

The first measure would entail revising, accordingly, the general functioning of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The UN is a famously complex institution, and bodies such as the Security Council have long been criticized for being beholden to the influence of its most powerful members. While not as critical as the Security Council, COP meetings, which work under the banner of the UNFCCC, obey the same logic of power and influence. Therefore, they would have to be reconfigured so that the mantra that “all the sides can and must be heard” is, once and for all, dismissed as a rhetorical trap for the more powerful voices to dictate the agenda. The parties would have to be represented in a truly fair manner in relation to the main goal—reducing the impact of climate change—while paying particular attention to the two axes I mentioned above: responsibility and burden. Simply put, those to blame historically for the current environmental crisis would have to play a secondary role, while those who are the recipients of its destructive force must be named the leading voices of the process.

¹⁶ Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997.

¹⁷ López 2007.

¹⁸ Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997, 67.

Second, no private interest must play a part at any of the meetings, nor in the planning of the future of the UNFCCC while the planet heats up, the oceans rise, and human and nonhuman life suffers. Questions such as economic growth, trade, and profit are doubtlessly inseparable from the constitution of life in common, and those must be fully present in COP agendas. However, the point should not be to include in the collective decision-making process representatives of the private sector, whose objective is not to ameliorate the current environmental conditions but to make money under them and, often, also out of them. The point should be, instead, to find solutions to the fact that the most vulnerable to climate change are indeed those who have been, as a result, most harshly punished by economic disparity. Surely, the whole process will continue to be betrayed if representatives of a variety of industries are allowed to participate. Unbridled capitalism is what has brought us to this point, often while openly flouting governmental regulation and oversight. It is time for planetary governance to regain the terrain that the private sector has invaded and exclude the agents of profit-making who are complicit in compounding the climate crisis.

A third and final measure might entail placing special emphasis on transnational coalitions during conferences of the parties. It is, of course, important for countries and regions to advocate for their needs and pledge their commitments to the goal of reducing greenhouse emissions and other reforms. Furthermore, transnational engagement is already an important part of COP meetings, as seen in discussions of scientific research about the effects of climate change on life conditions in specific global regions. However, if the talks are primarily structured along geographic and geopolitical lines, they might cause the entrenchment of the positions of those who desperately need change and those who advocate for minimum intervention or, in the worst of cases, doing nothing at all. Such entrenchment may also curtail the emergence of globally oriented solutions that can become more widespread and positively impact a larger number of people. Many of the criteria to measure the impact of climate change are already based on transposable identity markers such as race and gender, as well as other categories such as labor, biodiversity, mobility, and risk. Reshuffling these in order to address common problems across geographically disconnected regions may then have a powerful impact. Once a specific issue is identified—such as the displacement of populations due to crop failure—solutions can be tested out and knowledge can be shared across different site-specific scenarios. Finally, a spirit of global solidarity may also arise from such an effort that helps represent vulnerable populations in those Global South countries whose governments seek to prevent any change, as well as people who experience the impact of climate change but may nevertheless be invisible to the process because they live in the Global North.

Unless the rules of engagement change, global climate meetings are destined, at best, to exacerbate the “gridlock” in which we currently find ourselves, which leads, in Guterres’s words, to “[n]o cooperation,” “[n]o dialogue,” and “[n]o collective problem solving.”¹⁹ The central issue is that dialogue, or a semblance of it, might continue to be upheld as the reason to celebrate COP meetings every year. At worst, climate change talks as currently designed will go down in history as the main venue through which the uninhabitability of the planet was designed, sanctioned, and adjudicated. Either way, it is crucial that we establish the foundations for dialogue about climate change without perpetuating a never-ending cycle that protects, under the veneer of planetary engagement, the continuation of business as

¹⁹ “Guterres” 2022.

usual. As Freire said in one of the most celebrated texts on the politics of dialogue, “The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both.”²⁰ Without profound alterations to the current COP dynamics, future climate talks will fail, repeating this pattern and deteriorating the political substance of dialogue that glues society together. Climate talks cannot be a mere spectacle of engagement where the agenda remains unchanged after everyone has had their say. We need, urgently, a truly democratic intervention that produces dialogic events where Global South voices lead the world out of the suicidal path we are set on.

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²⁰ Freire 2000, 44.

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