

UN climate meetings organized in a way that benefits richer, larger countries: Study

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The COP climate meetings are organized in a way that benefits richer and larger countries at the expense of smaller and poorer countries, according to a new study from Lund University and the University of

Leeds. The study also labels the participating countries as either Radicals, Opportunists, Hypocrites or Evaders.

Every year, the UN organizes its global climate change Conference of the Parties, "COP," with the aim to create action to halt climate change and support those vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

"Our analysis clearly shows that some groups are not heard or represented. The very structure of the COPs makes it almost impossible for smaller countries to voice their interests since they are not able to be present in all the parallel negotiations," says Lina Lefstad, a Ph.D. student at Lund University and lead author of the study.

The study, published in *Critical Policy Studies*, is based on an analysis of fifteen previous COPs. The analysis shows that countries with more [economic power](#) have more influence over the negotiation processes at the COPs at the expense of poorer, often smaller, and less [developed countries](#). This power materializes in different ways.

For example, the wealthier the country is, the more delegates it can send to COP, which means that it can be active in all the parallel sessions. At COP15 in Denmark in 2009, China sent 233 delegates, compared to Haiti, which sent seven, and Chad, which sent three people, respectively.

"The UN should at the very least have a cap on how many delegates a country or an organization can send. It is only by changing the structure to allow for the majority of voices to be heard the negotiations can become truly fair," says Lina Lefstad.

Lina Lefstad points out how the number of delegates sent by the fossil fuel industry are increasing annually, with 636 sent to last year's COP27 in Egypt. In contrast, representatives from [civil society](#) and [indigenous groups](#) are not present in the same numbers, which means that they have

less opportunity to build alliances and present their views. This has ramifications for what perspectives are heard at the COP.

"While neither the fossil industry nor civil society have voting powers at the COP, this is still a major problem. The [fossil fuel industry](#) builds strong alliances with oil-producing countries and lobbies, with the aim to block decisions to, for example, phase out [fossil fuels](#)," says Jouni Paavola, co-author of the study and Professor of Environmental Social Science at the University of Leeds.

The study also analyzes how different countries and alliances frame climate justice for their own strategic ends. It identified four different country groups, entitled the Radicals, the Opportunists, the Hypocrites, and the Evaders.

While the Radicals, such as small island states and civil society, fight for novel mechanisms to address climate change effects, the Opportunists, such as Saudi Arabia and India, frame climate justice around historical responsibility and claim their right to develop economically.

The Hypocrites, which include the EU, Canada, and Norway, recognize their contribution to climate change but have so far done little to deliver on their promises. Finally, the Evaders aim to block justice claims made by others, view the idea of equity as too prescriptive, and include countries like the US.

"These groupings show how the concept of climate justice is being used very strategically for countries' own ends. Unless the UN develops a universally agreed response to help those who are suffering the most from climate change, climate justice will continue to be used as a negotiating tool, as opposed to leveraging real change," concludes Lina Lefstad.

Here are the four groups, according to the study, with their different framings of climate justice:

- The Radicals include the alliance of small island states, least developed countries, and civil-society organization observers for whom climate change is a real, imminent threat. The group advocates for a low-temperature increase limit and proposes novel mechanisms to deal with climate change.
- The Opportunists consist of like-minded developing countries who frame [climate](#) justice around historical responsibility and their right to develop to avoid responsibility despite their growing emissions, economies, and power, for example, Saudi Arabia and India.
- The Hypocrites include Norway, Canada, and the EU countries. They recognize their contribution to [climate change](#) and use cosmopolitan principles in their statements yet avoid responsibility by proposing libertarian market mechanisms, which means their pledges have not fully materialized.
- The Evaders are led by the US and include Russia. This group sees equity as too normative and blocks justice claims made by others. They also blocked the welcoming of scientific reports, for example, the IPCC 1.5C special report.

More information: Lina Lefstad et al, The evolution of climate justice claims in global climate change negotiations under the UNFCCC, *Critical Policy Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/19460171.2023.2235405](https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2023.2235405)

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