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COP27 and the New Rise of the Global South

Janice Golding
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Abstract

Developing countries require direct and indirect financial and non-financial assistance to address the climate crisis. The COP27 announcement of a new Loss and Damage Fund as well the unveiling of the Bridgetown Initiative collectively hold substantial promise to alter the course of climate multilateralism. The outcome of COP27 has presented unprecedented opportunities for the Global South to build global solidarity for climate justice, but the path ahead will not be easy. Materialization of support to developing countries may be, at best, not sustainable, or at worst, unforeseeable without consistent application of principles and values enshrined in historic, moral accountability for the climate crisis. With the threat of widening geopolitical divides in climate multilateralism, new reconstructed principles and values will be the bedrock for reforms.
World leaders addressing the seventy-eighth session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), held in September 2023, pointed out paralysis in multilateralism. Narrow, insular agendas, increased alienation and inimical geopolitical alliances were highlighted. The state of multilateralism is attributed to commitments not actualized, promises broken, pledges not materializing, and application of principles not observed (or at least not consistently applied). Pervasive mistrust, for example, between the Global North and Global South, between poor and rich nations, between East and West, etc., complicates multilateralism. For some at UNGA 78, the founding agenda of multilateralism had shifted for the worse since the signing of the UN Charter in 1945. Negative sentiments such as these expressed by world leaders place climate governance and multilateralism under sharp scrutiny.

The Emissions Gap Report 2022 shows that the entire African continent accounts for the world’s lowest share of greenhouse gas emissions (3.8 percent). Similarly, Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are responsible for only 0.2 percent of global emissions. In contrast, the United States and the European Union are responsible for 19 and 13 percent of global emissions respectively. Developing countries, in particular SIDS and Least Developed Countries (LDCs), are among those countries suffering most from the impacts of the climate crisis.

A total of thirty-three African countries are on the UN List of LDCs. More than 50 percent of debt increases in developing countries (associated with 3.3 billion people) is linked to climate disaster recoveries and reconstruction. According to the UN’s Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2023, fifty-two low- and middle-income developing countries are either in debt distress or at high risk of debt distress. Of these, twenty-three are in Africa, accounting for more than 40 percent of the world’s poorest people. The moral dimension of the climate crisis is this: the world’s wealthiest countries are responsible for climate change, yet the effects of losses and damages are being felt first and worst by developing countries. Scholars refer to this moral dimension as climate apartheid and climate colonialism. For the first time in history, climate scientists (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC) acknowledged that colonialism is a historic and ongoing driver of the climate crisis: “Present development challenges causing high vulnerability are influenced by historical and ongoing patterns of inequity such as colonialism, especially for many Indigenous Peoples and local communities.” Officials and scientists from around the globe now recognize the significant role colonialism has played in heating our planet and destroying its many gifts.

The Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, an activist-diplomat, has been an important driver of climate multilateralism reforms. In her address to UNGA 78, Prime Minister Mottley stated: “We can’t keep putting the interest of the few before the lives of many.” She aptly quoted from a song by Ghanaian reggae artist Rocky Dawuni, “How many roads do we have to walk just to make it to the door, only to be told we were too late?” The artist is also famed for another hit song bearing the phrase, “Never bow down to the gods… no retreat, no surrender…” On the global stage, the corpus of effort of Prime Minister Mottley is on financing égalité and ethical aspects, and the need to summon morality that is appropriate to the climate challenges ahead.

Here, I present an interdisciplinary article, the objective of which is to qualify transformation in climate governance and multilateralism from the perspective of developing countries, and to examine the key drivers. This article aims to contextualize organized action and growing solidarity among developing countries in processes associated with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). My article does not stem from a theoretical framework or a particular ideology. In charting progress, I analyze and compare issues, and examine emerging trends. For this purpose, I draw on the term, ‘Global South’ because it offers a
useful analytical lens to describe center-periphery global power relations. Of late, ‘Global South’ epistemology faces increasing critique predominantly among Global North scholars. In this article, the term is applied sensu lato, which is consistent with the lexicon adopted by the G20 Indonesia and India Presidencies (2022 and 2023 respectively) and premised on the common past and current developmental experiences and trajectories.

**Background**

Colloquially called the ‘Paris Agreement 1.5 degree Celsius target’ (which materialized at the meeting of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) 21 in 2015), Parties to the Paris Agreement are required to ensure that carbon emissions decline by 45 percent by 2030 (relative to 2010 levels) and reach ‘net zero’ by 2050. Recent science in UNEP and IPCC reports indicates that achieving this target is unlikely, and that the planet will cross the global warming threshold of 1.5°C within ten to fifteen years. Phasing out dependence on fossil fuels is predicted to be gradual. Global trade and market data published by the International Energy Agency (IEA, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, membership-based organization) indicate that fossil fuels will need to continue to play a role in the world’s energy mix through to 2050. Many refer to this state of affairs as a ‘suicidal trajectory’ and ‘living on borrowed time.’

Research demonstrates the significant human cost of the climate crisis. Human mortality statistics show that between 1960 and 1990, already some 9 percent of people (more than 600 million) have been displaced by climate-induced events. By the end of the twenty-first century (2080–2100), current policies leading to around 2.7°C global warming could leave one third (22–39 percent) of people displaced.

The 2022 World Inequality Report states that the world’s welfare inequality is getting more extreme in all countries. The inequality distribution gap between high-income and low-income countries is augmenting due to the increasing frequency and severity of climate disasters, in addition to the sharp economic downturn in most developing countries in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, surges in fuel and food prices, higher interest rates, and a bleak outlook on their mounting debt.

The climate crisis is influencing the loss of villages, industry, and property, and creating stranded assets, in addition to loss of cultural identity (history, culture, and language). People are increasingly turning to court systems to combat the climate crisis, with climate-related court cases more than doubling since 2017. Since December 2022, a total of 2,180 were filed in sixty-five jurisdictions, including international and regional courts, tribunals, quasi-judicial bodies, or other adjudicatory bodies such as Special Procedures at the United Nations and arbitration tribunals. The majority of these cases have been brought in the United States; some 17 percent of cases is reported in developing countries (mainly in SIDS).

How did we get to this point? The unfortunate history dates to the blood, sweat, and tears from territories of the Global South that built economies elsewhere and that drove the Industrial Revolution’s subsequent innovations in fossil fuels. Indigenous people from Global South territories were trafficked and treated as uncivilized, sub-human chattel, and subjected to brutal humiliation. The bedrock of the slave trade, which endured for almost four and a half centuries, was its racist justification and economic manipulations. Today’s prosperous developed countries have benefited from free labor.

Historically, what unites Europe and America is their role in slavery and colonialism, which built their economies. The lingering effects of this legacy remains, with many of its victims still alive as heirs who have inherited socioeconomic disadvantages. The prevailing sentiment is denial.
of this persistent legacy, despite evidence of institutionalized prejudices and of countries, territories, and people undermined or socioeconomically subjugated. Climate injustice has been shown to disproportionately affect those who are economically marginalized, and in the Global North, it is evident predominantly among poor people of color. The United States Environmental Protection Agency finds that by a factor of some 35 percent, African American and Hispanic individuals in the United States are least able to prepare for, and recover from, heat waves, poor air quality, and flooding (based on an analysis of income, educational attainment, race and ethnicity, and age).\(^{15}\)

In examining connections for justice in an era of climate crisis and emergency, Potter et al. coin a powerful and interesting term, “shadow places,” and remind us that there exist multiple disregarded and unknown places in the world associated with deeply unjust and deeply unfair systems.\(^{16}\) They argue that these shadow places require new responsibilities that consider the uncomfortable and generate reparative possibilities and alternative futures.

In drawing on truthful historical and structural complexities, climate justice is associated with correcting inappropriate socioeconomic choices in the past, when the science was unclear, and when the moral parameters were poorly presented or disregarded. Choices of economic system, food system, energy system, etc. were not made by people in countries that are now disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. In this context, the climate crisis is fundamentally a global human rights issue.

Today, the Global South—the former colonies of the Global North—is no longer a passive, indolent follower, but increasingly emerging as a proactive solution-seeker. The general Global South dogma is not founded on the giving or receiving of alms or charity. Instead, it is founded on the Global South wanting to collaboratively solve the climate crisis in a just and fair manner.

Winds of Change: The Changing Discourse from the Global South

Efforts to build a global climate governance regime formally commenced in 1992, when countries adopted the UNFCCC as an overarching multilateral agreement. In the northern spring of 1995, the UN hosted its first UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP1) in Berlin. Here, broadly defined solutions to climate change were forged and subsequently culminated in the Berlin Mandate (coincidentally, Berlin was also the city where in 1884, the outcome of an international conference led to demarcating the map of Africa and allocating African territories to European colonialists, resulting in the ‘Scramble for Africa’). In seeking a practical mechanism to implement this agreement, in 1997, two years after COP1, Member States negotiated the Kyoto Protocol at COP3 in Kyoto, Japan, as a further set of norms, rules, and principles to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. By that time, scientific consensus had been established that global warming is occurring and that human-made carbon dioxide emissions is the driver. However, the Kyoto Protocol’s implementation encountered obstacles that brought into question the effectiveness of the multilateral climate agreement.\(^{17}\) For almost a decade thereafter, several influential countries refused commitment to the Kyoto Protocol. The enduring stumbling block was associated with the phrase, “common but differentiated responsibilities,” arising from the UNFCCC Berlin Mandate, and earlier, originating from Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration at the first Rio Earth Summit held in 1992 in Brazil.

Recognition of the need to address loss and damages associated with climate disasters was established in 2007, at COP13 in Bali, Indonesia. In ensuing years at COP meetings, a UNFCCC work program on climate loss and damage was established and implemented. At COP26, developing countries (G77 and China) proposed establishment of a dedicated Loss and Damage
finance facility. The proposal gained inadequate support among developed countries and instead, Member States agreed to establish a dialogue called the Glasgow Climate Pact (which is to run through to June 2024). The following year, at COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, a new Loss and Damage Fund was agreed upon after a fifteen-year obfuscated course (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Milestones of the loss and damage discourse in the international negotiating regime over fifteen years (2007–2022).

The new Loss and Damage Fund agreement was touted by the UNFCCC as one of the premier achievements of COP27. One year later, amid concern for rising geopolitical polarization between developed and developing countries, its substantive details still need ironing out (e.g., consensus on the new fund’s scope, scale, eligibility, and institutional home). The fund’s purpose is to assist impacted communities, to regain lost development, and to ‘build back better’ from climate disasters (recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction).

While the Loss and Damage Fund agreement was the outcome of a global UNFCCC-led multilateral process, it was the announcement of the Bridgetown Initiative at COP27 that emerged as even more ambitious in scope and scale. Named after the capital city of Barbados, a climate-vulnerable Caribbean nation, the Bridgetown Initiative was unveiled by Prime Minister Mottley. It called for radical economic reforms to enable inclusive, resilient finance to address climate and wider developmental crises. Presently, the financing landscape under-serves many developing countries of the Global South, particularly SIDS and LDCs. These country typologies face unique challenges to attaining the economies of scale needed to achieve and maintain growth (in lieu of currency risk and overpricing, informational and data deficiencies, and the prejudiced risk criteria of credit-rating systems). Wealthier countries are generally able to borrow at significantly lower interest rates than SIDS and LDCs because per capita income is a key credit-rating criterion for access to concessional finance. This criterion presents a formidable barrier for many developing countries to develop resilient infrastructure and other capabilities required to beat down the climate crisis.
The Bridgetown Initiative was the result of a non-UN-led multilateral process with its genesis associated with long-established SIDS mechanisms (e.g., the Alliance of Small Island States, AOSIS). In complement to a financing facility for climate loss and damage, the Bridgetown Initiative offers means to address historical injustices, and at the same time, to fortify climate resilience through accessible and affordable finance. The phenomenon of a sub-global non-UN-led multilateral process providing an overarching contextual basis for a UN-led global multilateral process, is a significant milestone, and a major achievement for inter-governmental coordination.

During 2023, on the path from COP27 to COP28, a series of successful meetings have been taking place to advance consensus on climate loss and damage. The Global South is generally calling for guaranteed compensation from developed countries that are historically responsible for the climate crisis. While some developing countries recognize the need for developed countries to contribute funds toward the issue, framing payments as reparations is controversial.

The majority of developed countries do not want to admit liability or engage on compensation matters. Broad transatlantic trends in shared concerns and a generally common direction of climate policy have been observed. This is unsurprising given that both sides of the Atlantic—the United States and the European Union—are not only connected by history, culture, and a sense of common global purpose, but also by multilateral finance institutions created in the aftermath of World War II (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund). For example, United States Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, testified before a House Foreign Affairs Oversight and Accountability Subcommittee hearing on the State Department's climate budget, on Capitol Hill in Washington, that “United States would not pay climate reparations under any circumstances.” The qualm held by the United States, and by other countries, is that the 2015 Paris Agreement’s decision language on loss and damage, specifically Article 8.1, is not a basis for claiming compensation, but instead, makes provision for not preventing countries from seeking compensation for loss and damage through other avenues. As such, developed countries’ prevailing view is that the COP27 decision to establish a new Loss and Damage Fund was forged in the spirit of cooperation, not liability and compensation. Thus, from the perspective of many Global North countries, reference to historical accountability and financing obligation is unwarranted. Further, the world’s largest annual emitter (China) and the world’s biggest oil exporter (the United Arab Emirates) are not associated with historical responsibility, yet their moral duty to loss and damage is evidently unchecked. These dimensions have yielded a significant shift in the global multilateral temperament and are a terse reminder of the inherent inequitable power dynamics in international relations.

**Radical Revisionism: the Call from the Global South**

In April 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, and Prime Minister Mia Mottley joined forces under the Bridgetown Initiative, and launched Bridgetown Initiative 2.0 to address the immediate needs of countries facing debt distress and liquidity challenges. This step demonstrated the UN’s recognition of the inadequacy of existing financing mechanisms to serve developing countries. The new UN Bridgetown Initiative proposes a large-scale stimulus package to invest in broader developmental goals (UN Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs), while emphasizing major reforms of the global financial architecture. It recognizes that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach is inappropriate, that differential financing policies and regulations are required, and that climate vulnerability is a veritable criterion for lending terms. The reforms are intended to channel more credit and investment into climate resilience, and to establish rules for debt relief for climate-vulnerable countries.
The World Bank CEO, Ajay Banga (and to some extent the International Monetary Fund), has expressed strong commitment to transform in accordance with the key tenets of the UN Bridgetown Initiative 2.0. President William Ruto of Kenya and Prime Minister Mottley have been the world’s most active heads of state lobbying for these global climate finance reforms, emphasizing that business-as-usual finance to developing countries is not only a threat to global economic and financial stability, but also unjust, discriminatory, unhumanitarian, and not helpful in decelerating planetary overheating. Discussions on leveraging and ‘sweating balance sheets’ to unlock further capital which could, for example, cover debt pause for a sustained period, stretch repayment tenure terms, and enable special drawing rights for climate-vulnerable countries, are ongoing.21

But what else do these bold calls from the Global South mean?

The calls are for developed countries from the Global North to pay their climate debts associated with historical injustices. This is founded on the moral accountability of unpaid debt owed to countries that are disproportionately affected by climate change. The calls highlight outdatedness and fundamental hypocrisies of the current world order, and effectively point to course correction for a fair chance and a level playing field. In seeking to overhaul the global finance architecture and claiming new policy and new fiscal space, the calls symbolize a much wider struggle: a seemingly elusive quest for governance, democracy, peace, and prosperity to be created, cultivated, and consolidated by developing countries.

While the dialogue and engagements on climate finance reforms and the new Loss and Damage Fund continue to be difficult, the journey to COP28 and beyond will require constant reminder of the principle of moral leadership.

**Changing of the Guard: Key Shifts in Global South Climate Multilateralism**

Joyeeta Gupta, in *The History of Global Climate Governance*, describes inherent, systemic fractures in the climate multilateral complex. The effectiveness of multilateral climate agreements and global climate governance has been bedeviled by segregation of Member States into small negotiating factions, top-down approaches, isolation of non-state actors from decision-making, lack of coordination and cooperation, and lack of linkage to sustainable development. In general, this is due to several key factors. There is no recourse against non-compliance with voluntary contributions (such as the Paris Agreement’s Nationally Determined Contributions, NDCs); there is propensity to reduce or level-down global policy ambitions, for example, in instances where ambitious contributors are not incentivized to pursue their ambitions because the global aggregate of their efforts depends on the contributions of less ambitious contributors; the difficulty of achieving consensus on policies often leads to ‘one-size-fits-all’ policies that may be appropriate for some but notoriously inappropriate for others; and most importantly, there are unique social, political, and economic country conditions, for example, on challenges associated with a socially just and equitable transition away from fossil fuels and the need for social protection measures, jobs preservation, and re-skilling a moribund labor force in fossil fuel value chains.22

UNFCCC COPs have become ‘bigger’ and more inviting (and more expensive, and with a higher carbon footprint!). Formal engagement opportunities (including digital enablement) among developing countries of the Global South have increased and have served as important platforms for interaction, for exchanging views and forging mutual understanding, and for elevating social and economic development issues while strengthening alliances. This, coupled with democratization of civil society movements and expressions of youth constituencies in developing countries, has enabled incorporation of both top-down State-led issues and bottom-up non-State-
led issues in Global South climate negotiations. This has generated collectivism and fostered unity and solidarity among developing countries of the Global South.

COP27 has been a historical turning point to address past climate injustices. Based on my subjective reviews, a comparison of observed transformational aspects associated with COP27 is presented in Table 1. Overall, climate governance and multilateralism has shifted from a scoping, information gathering, and learning phase, to a highly political phase. The pre-COP27 era was an incunabulum, a beginning of sorts, of a rejuvenated era in Global South climate negotiations. There is an observed tendency toward multidimensionalism in the scope and content of future climate negotiations, a shift toward greater inclusivity and optimization of citizen power, and a greater degree of Member State accountability. The Global South is leading the discourse on the development of systemic and structural transformation challenges, and on ‘people-first’ morality in the political implementation required for the climate crisis.

Table 1. Transmutation of climate governance and multilateralism associated with developing countries of the Global South.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transformational Aspect</th>
<th>Pre-COP27</th>
<th>COP27 and Beyond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Narrow, Diagnostic, Scoping, Learning, Process-oriented</td>
<td>Principles and Implementation-oriented, Integrated, Multi-focal, Cross-cutting, Inter-disciplinary, Comprehensive, Expansive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Scientific, Carbon emissions, Trade, Economics</td>
<td>Food security, State security, Human migration, Energy security, Public health, Economic growth, SDGs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Approach</td>
<td>Technical, Methodological, Operational, Fragmented, Diffuse</td>
<td>Principles, Values, Foreign policy, Political ideology, Unity, Thought leadership, Geopolitical alliances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework</td>
<td>Insular, Member State driven, Not highly inclusive</td>
<td>Participatory, People-centered, Leave No One Behind (Gender, Youth, and Indigenous peoples), Whole-of-society, Private sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>Member State driven, Top-down policy architecture, Public sector, Focus on UNFCCC national focal point (environment ministry)</td>
<td>Whole-of-government, More senior UNFCCC delegations, Focus on ministries of foreign affairs and heads of state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In bygone years, the positioning of Global South developing countries at UNFCCC COPs seemed deficient in constructive solidarity, strategy, and coordination on non ibi issues (‘do not go there’ issues, such as climate reparations). The content brought to the negotiations was diffuse and narrow in being centered on the technical and management aspects of carbon emissions, and on peripheral aspects of climate loss and damage. Now most recently, the content appears to be centered on wider and bolder aspects of climate finance reform, as well as focused on multi-focal aspects ranging from food and water security to human migration, public health, land degradation, and clean energy systems. The trend is earmarked as being multi-dimensional, associated with integration and inclusion of cross-cutting issues, and more people-centric. Conceptually, climate policy has become a multi-level policy arena, which is currently being shaped by principle-setting moral approaches to climate change attribution and re-shaping the international climate finance environment. As a result, the climate crisis finds strong expression in macro-economic and development agendas of countries, including in the UN Cooperation Frameworks at the national
level. Already, climate issues are central in the foreign policy of most countries, and hence, the climate crisis influences geopolitical alliances.

There has also been an evolution in State actor engagement in UNFCCC COPs. In the past, delegations and representation at COPs were mainly technical personnel from the national UNFCCC focal point (such as a Ministry of Environment). Today, Heads of Delegation to UNFCCC COPs are typically heads of state or ministers of foreign affairs, accompanied by the national UNFCCC focal point. State officials involved in climate change negotiations are increasingly also involving the state disaster risk authority, state security, and ministry of defense as key national organs in the climate crisis. Overall, climate diplomacy is a ‘whole of-government’ focus.

Expanding stakeholder inclusivity, with greater non-state actor involvement, has been an important ingredient in shaping the context of climate multilateralism. More opportunities exist today for the private sector and other stakeholder constituencies (such as women, youth, and Indigenous people) to present their views. The most important non-State actor in the climate crisis—the oil and gas private sector—must substantively participate in the call from developing countries of the Global South. Getting major industry players to make decarbonization commitments that would help limit global warming is an ongoing challenge. The preparation for COP28 hosted by the United Arab Emirates in 2023 is laden with ongoing efforts arranged by COP28 President, Sultan AlJaber, to secure a firm commitment from big industry to reduce carbon emissions.

Conclusions

The Global South’s climate financing gap and developmental needs are substantive. Making global finance responsive to the needs of developing countries is one of the ways to ensure that achievement of the Paris Agreement 1.5°C target is accelerated.

Climate governance and multilateralism aspects have undergone a rapid evolution, most notably on milestones associated with the global climate finance system reforms as enshrined in the objectives and principles of the UN Bridgetown Initiative 2.0. While the practical dimensions of a new Loss and Damage Fund remain under discussion, its alignment with the realpolitik, spirit, and aspiration of the Bridgetown Initiative architecture is critical for resonance with SIDS, LDCs, and other developing countries of the Global South.

With the small window of opportunity that is fast closing, a faster pace of change is required. This calls for better organization and coordination among Global South alliances, including in bilateral cooperation alliances in the multilateral context. This is essential for the construction and reconstruction of the international regime.

COP27 has been a major achievement for the Global South. Its outcomes offer unprecedented opportunities for the Global South to build global solidarity for climate justice. With the threat of widening geopolitical divides, new reconstructed principles and values will be the bedrock for reforms in the international regime. Decolonizing climate negotiations and international finance systems will not make the future work of diplomatic negotiators easy.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Cecilia Kinuthia-Njenga, UNFCCC Director for Intergovernmental Coordination and Collective Progress, for inviting me to author this article, and for stimulating discussions on global climate progress.
Notes

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