

LESSONS LEARNT UAE COP28 PRESIDENCY

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مركز
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Centre
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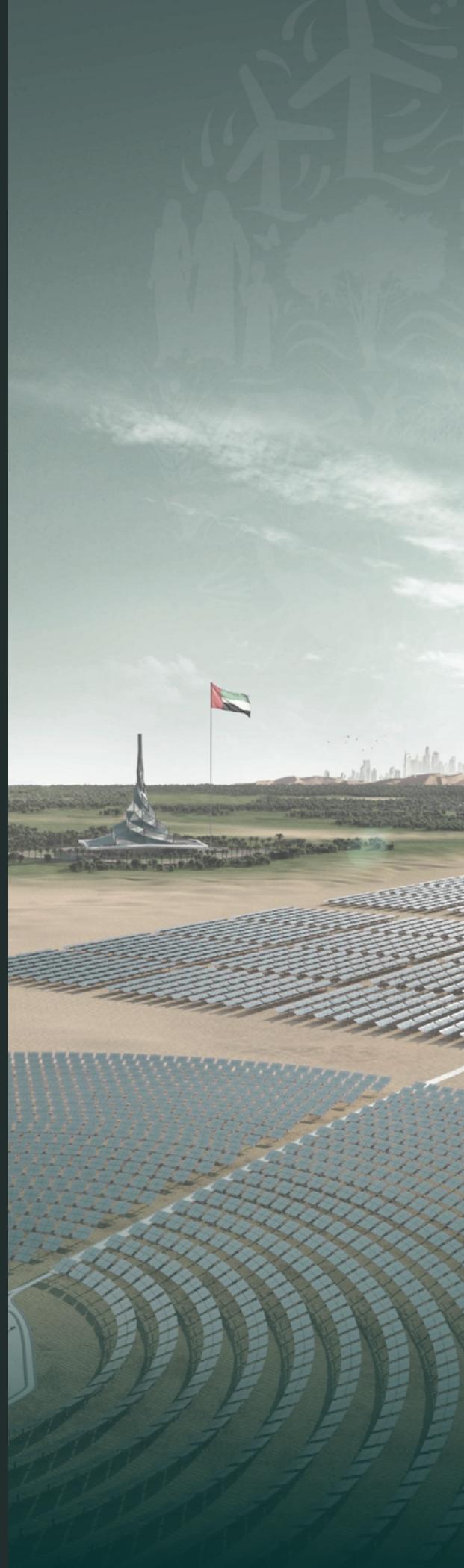
SUMMARY

Multilateral diplomacy is inherently complex. Climate negotiations are among its most demanding forms. Every year, a different country takes on the challenging and prestigious task of presiding over the climate change negotiations.

The host country is responsible for welcoming sometimes over 40,000 participants to the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC and for facilitating consensus among its 198 Parties, a role that requires exceptional leadership and diplomacy.

This report presents insights on how the United Arab Emirates (UAE) successfully took on this challenge, guided by a strategy to bridge divides and deliver ambitious yet balanced outcomes. Based on 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with COP28 negotiators and supporting staff, it draws lessons learnt from the UAE's journey as COP Presidency, specifically focusing on the team that facilitated the multilateral negotiations. The report provides recommendations on the bidding process, staff recruitment, capacity building, communication, relations with other negotiating parties, and strategies for facilitating the negotiation process.

The aim of the report is to support other countries who are considering taking on the COP Presidency, but also more generally inform countries' approach to multilateral engagement—be it within the UNFCCC or other processes. It shows how countries with different starting grounds can rise to the challenge and step up their participation on the diplomatic scene.



Key Recommendations

Bidding

- Before considering taking on a multilateral engagement opportunity, reflect on the potential risks and benefits associated with taking on such a role.
- Think about logistics planning.
- Chart out a human resource plan.
- Secure support for your bid from partner countries.

Recruitment and team structure

- Reflect on the desired characteristics of the team that will carry out the enhanced multilateral engagement. What substantive expertise and what kind of cross-cutting skills would be helpful for them to have?
- Reflect on the desired chain of command, keeping in mind possible thematic clusters and the need to limit bottlenecks in communication and decision making.
- Devise a plan for how to assign staff to specific issues and hierarchical positions in the team. Be transparent about the process.
- If the team falls short on some of the desired skills, consider hiring advisors to support their capacity building. Reflect on what kinds of advisors would be needed to best support the team, especially whether there should be dedicated advisors for specific negotiation issues.

Capacity building

- Devise a structured onboarding process. Make sure that everyone, regardless of when they join the team, gets access to the training material, and identify alternative training opportunities where needed.
- Think about a phased approach to capacity building, for example: 1) basics of the subject matter and the relevant multilateral process; 2) detailed overview of the negotiation issues and expectations for the specific meeting; 3) practice-oriented skills training on negotiation techniques; and 4) cross-cutting skills training, such as tailoring messaging to specific audiences.
- Ideally, ensure that people have a dedicated learning phase to maximize the effectiveness of the capacity-building programme and foster a gentle onboarding.
- Tailor capacity building to individual peoples' needs, as far as possible. Ensure sufficient time for feedback to support staff development.
- Leverage opportunities for immersive capacity building both within the process at hand and related events.
- Build a good relationship with and leverage support from whichever UN organisation is in charge of the process.

Key Recommendations

Communication and coordination

- Ensure good flow of information among all team members, incl. those working on a part-time basis or supporting the team only in a time-bound manner.
- Provide a space for regular, open, and outcome-oriented discussions within the team.
- Establish a communication channel reserved for urgent matters that require leadership's attention. Ensure that leadership is reachable and reactive to respond to emerging needs for intervention.
- Foster a positive team spirit. Provide space for informal bonding opportunities and ensure team members feel appreciated. Leverage the motivational power of leadership recognition.

The negotiation process

- Devise an overall strategy for engaging in the process.
- Liaise with countries and other stakeholders early on to get insights about their expectations towards the process and build trust.
- Develop a shared definition of what a successful outcome would be. Building on this, be clear and consistent in outward messaging. Put emphasis on partners' shared responsibility for success.
- Invest time and resources in building trusted relationships with parties and stakeholders. To this end, meet people face-to-face and maintain an open line of communication.
- Provide space for low stakes, informal discussions with and among parties.
- Gain a detailed understanding of issues under discussion, including interlinkages between them and the extent to which individual issues are considered priorities (in the process, at the specific meeting, and by individual countries). Develop scenarios to chart out possible pathways for the negotiations, paying due attention to potential ripple effects between issues. Use these reflections to define an issue prioritization that guides the Presidency's overall engagement.
- Devise a strategy for engaging on each issue, specifically when to stay back and when to push and through what means.
- Monitor progress and be ready to quickly intervene. Have an open line of communication with leadership levels to address such emerging needs and have support on stand-by, incl. logistics support.
- Identify individual countries' concerns and try to remedy them to pave the way for agreement.
- Identify which issues should be addressed at a more political level and when this should be the case.
- Keep an overview of progress across agenda items and gauge when draft texts on individual items may be ready to be submitted for adoption. If needed, table some draft decisions as a package deal.
- Strive to maintain partners' trust throughout the process.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Multilateral diplomacy is not an easy endeavour, and some forms of multilateral engagement are more challenging than others. However, it can also present opportunities for countries to demonstrate leadership and shape global outcomes. Every year, a different country takes on a particularly challenging task: presiding over the climate change negotiations.

As is the case in other multilateral agreements, the country that holds the Presidency of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the Conference of the Parties acting as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement has many roles to fulfil. It is in charge of much of the logistical preparations for the COP, moderates plenary discussions, ensures the rules of procedure are upheld, and—crucially—works with other countries, country coalitions and regional groupings to facilitate agreement on the various issues on the negotiation’s agenda. Taking on this role is a major diplomatic undertaking: The climate change negotiations are particularly complex, and it is increasingly difficult to facilitate consensus among the UNFCCC’s 198 parties.

Countries that are interested in taking on this responsibility need to prepare themselves years in advance. As the Presidency rotates between the United Nations’ five regional groups—the African Group, the Asia-Pacific Group, the Eastern European Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group, and the Western European and Others Group—the opportunity for any country to take on the role arises only ever so often. It may also be that several countries are interested in hosting the same COP session, in which case they need to campaign to secure their region’s nomination. In some cases, this process is rather smooth, with future Presidencies designated well in advance of their respective COP. In other cases, agreement at the regional level remains elusive and the Presidency ends up being designated with only a year to spare. Such late confirmation is challenging because it leaves little time for logistical preparation. It also means that there is less time for the Presidency to engage in the diplomatic groundwork needed to foster smooth negotiations.

This report presents insights on how the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took on this challenge. It leverages lessons learnt from the UAE’s journey as COP28 Presidency, specifically focusing on the team that facilitated the multilateral negotiations (as opposed to those focused on logistics or communications). The aim of the report is to support other countries who are considering taking on the Presidency of the climate negotiations, but also more generally inform countries’ approach to multilateral engagement—be it within the UNFCCC or other relevant processes. Recommendations formulated in the report will be most useful to countries which, similarly to the UAE, have comparatively small public administrations and limited prior engagement in the climate negotiations, but many insights will also be relevant for other types of stakeholders, including non-state actors.

After a short section on methodology, the report begins with some reflections about what to consider when bidding for a multilateral engagement opportunity of this magnitude and when structuring a negotiations team. The most substantive part of the report is then devoted to insights on capacity building, communication and coordination, and strategies for brokering multilateral agreement.

2. METHODOLOGY



The report distils insights gained from a series of semi-structured interviews with members of the UAE COP28 Presidency’s negotiations team. Over the course of two weeks, 25 interviews were conducted with the negotiations’ leadership, senior and junior negotiators, advisors, and staff from national entities that temporarily supported the negotiations team. The interviews lasted 1-1.5 hours, with all but one conducted in person.

The interviewees held various positions within the negotiation team, covered different negotiation topics, and became involved with the team at different points throughout the process. This provided varied insights on the team’s journey, starting from how the team was assembled to how it engaged with partner countries with a view to facilitate agreement in the negotiations.

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience, with the aim to draw out lessons learnt throughout the process. While there were a set of standard questions for all interviewees, follow-up questions varied depending on the course of the discussion and each interview was effectively tailored to the person’s specific profile and role within the team. The sequence of interviews was used to solidify insights by having different interviewees reflect on the same aspect of the team’s experience. The semi-structured nature of the interviews therefore facilitated both a broadening and deepening of the assessment. From these interviews, distilled key themes, recurrent points, and the overall narrative of the team’s experience were collected. Statements that are notably specific or frequently mentioned are emphasized in the report using quotation marks.

A noteworthy limit to this process is its timing. All interviews were conducted eight months after COP28. As a result, interviewees tended to recall certain moments or features that stood out to them, though their memories of specific details or the precise order of events may not be entirely accurate. Only one interview was conducted with each person rather than repeat interviews throughout the Presidency journey. Additionally, no team observations were conducted.

Furthermore, the report focuses only on the UAE’s experience. For one, the report does not contrast the interviewees’ perspective with that of outsiders who engaged with the UAE’s team. Additionally, while the insights that are relevant for other countries and stakeholders were highlighted, it is important to emphasize that countries’ COP Presidency journeys differ. They depend on factors such as the level of prior engagement in the climate process, overall institutional capacity, and resources available to dedicate to the Presidency process, and what is at stake in the negotiations at the specific session. While it would be valuable to conduct similar assessments for other countries that took on the COP Presidency, the report nevertheless presents many findings that should prove relevant to other stakeholders seeking to increase their engagement in the climate negotiations and other multilateral processes.

3. BIDDING TO HOST

For any country considering hosting a multilateral event such as the UN Climate Conference, it is important to weigh the potential benefits this role can bring, both to the nation itself and to the broader process, before carefully assessing the possible risks associated with taking on such a significant responsibility. This requires understanding the process at hand, expectations for the individual event, what the country can contribute to it, and the strategic gains it can achieve from elevating its role on the multilateral scene.

In terms of logistics, everyone was confident that the UAE would do a good job at hosting the COP, with many expressing confidence in the national event management capability. After all, the UAE could build on its experience hosting Expo 2020 in Dubai and the infrastructure around Expo City created for that purpose. This was not an overestimation. In no small part, COP28 will be remembered within the climate process as a logistics success: easy access to the venue through the subway; good room layout; reliable internet access; sufficient and affordable food options; ample accommodation options and readily accessible facilities inside and outside the venue.

In this sense, the UAE is an outlier. Many countries struggle with the logistical preparations for such high-profile and well-attended events, especially because not every location lends itself well to host a climate COP. The ideal host city is easily accessible via international air travel, has many decent and reasonably priced hotel rooms, and a very large conference centre that is easily accessible through public transportation. Countries need to think ahead about which city would be best suited for a COP and prepare compensatory measures when one or more of these features are lacking in the envisioned location. They may need to put in place temporary infrastructure such as dedicated shuttles to the venue, both within the host city and potentially to other cities if a lack of accommodations is forcing participants to stay further away. They may also need temporary tent-like infrastructure to expand venue capacity, as the square footage needed for the COP is significant. Evidently, this not only requires planning capacity, but also financial resources.

However, strong event management capability is by far not enough to make the COP a success. Hosting a COP means stepping up to contribute to an ongoing multilateral negotiation process that is shaped by specific rules and practices and that follows a long and complex political history, which is collectively steered by many countries and stakeholders. It is an inherently political event which requires preparations of a specific kind, as will be discussed throughout this report.

In this regard, the UAE faced a particular situation: while individual staff from national entities would participate in the climate negotiations on a rotational basis, the UAE had little history of continuous engagement in the process, except through the country's representation by the Arab Group. The UAE is by far not the only country to be in such a position. This circumstance nevertheless makes its experience hosting COP28 different from that of many previous Presidencies, such as Egypt or the UK, who have actively shaped the negotiations for many years. On the one hand, this may have provided the UAE with an advantage – it did not have much baggage that could compromise its work as COP Presidency, allowing its negotiations team to put forward new perspectives and approaches. Most importantly, the country had “a clean slate” which helped it to serve as an “honest broker.” On the other hand, it required the rapid development of institutional knowledge on the UNFCCC process and contacts that are crucial to successfully facilitate the negotiations. This brought about a number of specific challenges, including the need for staff to be recruited and trained in a short timeframe.

Taking on the Presidency of COP28 also entailed specific risks. One reason was the timing was such that many of the UAE's diplomats were tied up in New York to support the country's concurrent engagement as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. In addition to that, some COPs are more high-profile than others and, due to the expected conclusion of the first Global Stocktake (GST) under the Paris Agreement, this was a major milestone event for COP28. Expectations were especially high with regard to agreement on scaling up renewable energy capacity and energy efficiency and transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, which put the UAE—as an oil producing country—under particularly intense media scrutiny in the lead up to and during the negotiations. A failure to reach agreement, or an outcome seen as insufficiently ambitious, could have dented the UAE's credibility as a COP Presidency. For the UNFCCC, a disappointing outcome to COP28 would have further weakened trust in the climate negotiations process, which many people are deeming too slow, polarised and ineffective.

The UAE nevertheless decided to take on this challenge. A small team was assembled to secure support for the country's bid within the Asia-Pacific region. The team's argument was that the UAE would adopt the role of a strategic "bridge builder" in the classic divide between developed and developing countries that shape the climate negotiations. They also highlighted that having the UAE host the COP that was meant to conclude the first GST would serve to show that "solutions can come from anywhere", and that the UAE could serve as a trusted mediator across negotiating blocs." The campaign was ultimately successful and, building on the region's nomination, COP26 accepted the UAE's offer to host COP28.

Looking back, bidding to host COP28 was a high risk, high reward decision the outcome of which was in the UAE's favour. An important additional benefit to hosting COP28 was that it served as a "nation-building exercise" that connected stakeholders across the UAE. Everyone wanted to play a role, as interviewees put it. Many organisations, companies, and individuals offered to contribute in some way. The conference was an opportunity to raise awareness about climate change within the country and showcase efforts to respond to it.

Beyond this domestic effect, it also served to elevate the UAE's global standing and diplomatic reputation. Many consider that the true legacy of the COP28 Presidency lies in both the UAE Consensus, and the demonstration of how the UAE carries itself on the international scene. For the UAE, taking on the COP Presidency was not a one-off event, it was a stepping stone towards enhanced multilateral engagement. Ever since, it has been participating in the climate change negotiations much more actively and has sought a much more visible multilateral role internationally.

From a substantive perspective, the adoption of the decision on the operationalisation of the loss and damage fund and early pledging of finance on the COP's first day was also praised as a remarkable achievement. With this opening, the UAE set a precedent within the climate process and created positive momentum for the rest of COP28. The most significant way in which the conference moved the needle was the agreement for countries to contribute to advance global efforts towards tripling of renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency and the inclusion of language on transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in an orderly and equitable manner, in the decision on the outcome of the first Global Stocktake, in what constituted the first reference of such nature in 30 years of climate negotiations. If adequately implemented, this would prove beneficial to people and the planet and help build back trust in the process and its ability to deliver global solutions.

Recommendations

- Before considering taking on a multilateral engagement opportunity, reflect on the potential benefits thereof—both for the country and the process at hand—and the risks associated with taking on such a role. What are the expectations towards the specific event? How can the country contribute to achieving progress? Use this reflection to build a narrative around which the Presidency team can rally and leverage support—both to secure the regional nomination and during the actual term as COP Presidency.
- Think about logistics planning. Can you stem organizing a COP? Which city would be suitable? What kind of additional infrastructure needs to be put in place for the conference?
- Chart out a human resource plan. What staff would carry out the project? Do they have the necessary experience? If needed, can you recruit more people and train them?
- Secure support for the bid from partner countries. Ideally, secure the regional nomination and confirmation by the COP well in advance.



4. TEAM STRUCTURE

Depending on the structure of their civil service, countries will have different experiences taking on the COP Presidency.

Some countries have sizeable public administrations, with several dozen civil servants engaged in the climate negotiations on an ongoing basis, many more working on other multilateral environmental processes, and large diplomatic corps. They have many candidates with the ideal set of experience and qualifications to fill the ranks of their Presidency team. The main challenge for these countries will be to find a conducive way for such experienced staff to balance the role of the Presidency and distinguish it from the national position and interests, adjusting institutional structures if needed.

Lessons learnt from the UAE's experience will be especially relevant for countries which have smaller public administrations and few available civil servants with climate change or multilateral experience. These countries have to recruit and train much of the staff needed to take on the COP Presidency.

The UAE, for its part, created a dedicated COP28 Presidency office, which not only included a negotiations team but also a dedicated communications team, among others. The advantage of this approach is that there is no need to adhere to any form of institutional path dependency and the structure can be tailor-made to fit the needs of the Presidency project. The disadvantage is that virtually everything has to be built from scratch and that blind spots can manifest along the way, such as with regard to human resource management practices or business travel provisions.

In recruiting staff for the COP28 Presidency's negotiations team, the search net was cast wide. A broad call for interest served to identify individuals who showcased a high degree of motivation and the potential to get up to speed quickly. Many people were also considered based on recommendations. To benefit from diverse expertise and ensure strong cross-ministry alignment, several negotiators were seconded from their home organisations for the duration of the COP28 project.

A key lesson learnt from the UAE's experience is that one should **strive for a transparent process to assess each person's capacity and training needs and identify the most suitable role for them.** Key considerations include prior experience or demonstrated interest in specific negotiation topics; proficiency in extracting essential insights from extensive information; resilience in high-pressure environments; and strong communication abilities, encompassing comfort engaging with others in both formal and informal settings.

It is essential to carefully consider the overall team structure. Determining which matters can be handled individually and which require collective input is crucial. Additionally, identifying agenda items that may be grouped and addressed by sub-teams, as well as defining how responsibilities should be allocated within thematic clusters, is important. Given that the COP agenda comprises several interconnected issues—some demanding more involvement than others—the appropriate approach to these questions will necessarily differ according to the particular meeting context.

Broader considerations include establishing the negotiation team's overall chain of command and implementing strategies to prevent decision-making bottlenecks. Each team member's scope of authority should be clearly defined, along with protocols for consulting others when decisions exceed their mandate. Well-defined roles and responsibilities are essential not only for individuals but also for the collective effectiveness of the team, ensuring efficient information flow and enhancing responsiveness.

Ideally, countries should have a tentative team structure as early as the bidding phase. Once confirmation to host the COP is in place, they can then build their team accordingly and, where necessary, recruit additional people with specific positions in mind. Aspects such as negotiations experience, thematic expertise, and managerial skills should factor into both the general recruitment and the assignment to specific positions within the team. The structuring process should be conducted in a transparent manner to avoid friction and help the team adjust to potential reorganizations.

Countries whose negotiation team would benefit from extra support and capacity building may also want to hire advisors. The UAE's experience in this regard highlights two lessons. First, it is key to reflect about the role of the advisors, specifically whether the aim is for them to provide **cross-cutting and/or issue-specific support**, respectively for which issue(s) to hire dedicated advisors. The answer to these questions will depend on the team's experience and the COP's negotiation agenda, as the team may benefit from one type of advisor more than another. Second, if the aim is to have several advisors, it is worth thinking about hiring people **who are knowledgeable about different regional issues related to the COP agenda.** The UAE's combination of cross-cutting and issue-specific advisors constituted a "mini-UN": experts with diverse experience and regional knowledge. This ensured that the team received input aligned with the perspectives of various negotiating groups—an extremely valuable asset in a politically charged process with a history of conflicts between coalitions. Recruitment for such advisors can take place through various means, including leveraging existing contacts and inviting suggestions from the UNFCCC Secretariat.

Countries can also further broaden the ranks of their negotiations team on a temporary basis. Beyond short-term staff secondments from various ministries, the UAE's enlistment of diplomats-in-training for the smaller negotiation sessions of the Subsidiary Bodies in June and later for the COP itself stands out as an element for other countries to emulate. In addition, negotiation teams may benefit from having a dedicated project manager, including to handle coordination with other teams within the Presidency structure.

Recommendations

- Reflect on the desired characteristics of the team that will carry out the enhanced multilateral engagement. What substantive expertise and what kind of cross-cutting skills would be helpful for them to have?
- If needed, consider contracting staff from other organisations on a secondment basis to fill up the team with qualified people. Chart out a concrete handover plan for when they return to the home organisations.
- Reflect on the desired chain of command, keeping in mind possible thematic clusters and the need to limit bottlenecks in decision-making and communication.
- Devise a plan for how to assign staff to specific issues and hierarchical positions in the team. Strive to assess each person's capacity and training needs and identify the most suitable role for them. Be transparent about the process.
- Try setting up the team early on in the process and minimising turnover.
- If changes need to be made to the team structure, communicate about it to the entire team.
- Be clear as to everyone's roles and responsibilities.
- Provide guidelines, and if necessary skills training, for those in managerial positions.
- If the team falls short on some of the desired skills, consider hiring advisors to support their capacity building. Reflect on what kinds of advisors would be needed to best support the team, especially whether there should be dedicated advisors for specific negotiation issues.
- Leverage time-bound support by staff from national entities and diplomats-in-training. Devise a plan to clarify their contribution and ensure good flow of information between sessions.

5. CAPACITY BUILDING AND SUPPORT



Even countries with a long participation record and strong footing in the climate change negotiations often have their staff undergo some form of capacity building to help them prepare for taking on the COP Presidency.

They may not need to brush up on the UNFCCC process but still benefit from space to reflect about how the role of the Presidency differs from their usual engagement in the negotiations and how to adapt their mode of work accordingly. Capacity building is central to ensuring that all team members – regardless of their background – are fully equipped to operate at the highest level of multilateral diplomacy. **For them, training should touch upon a variety of aspects, including the UNFCCC’s history, workstreams, and negotiation dynamics, as well as cross-cutting negotiation skills.**

Fundamentally, the UAE’s experience highlights the value of a **dedicated learning phase** to align expertise and refine skills. This not only makes for a gentler onboarding but also serves to increase peoples’ learning outcomes. **Negotiators who have to start executing Presidency-related tasks while still familiarising themselves with the climate change process face the risk of not getting the full benefit of planned training programmes.**

Countries seeking to host the COP Presidency should be aware of the need to **devise a clear capacity-building programme based on what knowledge and skills staff members are expected to develop.** This will prove helpful should people join the team at different points in time: while it may not always be possible for later recruits to undergo the full capacity-building programme that earlier recruits benefited from, they should still receive a proper onboarding and be equipped with the means to develop the expected skill set. It is also valuable to think about **tailoring training elements to peoples’ specific needs**, as some team members might need to brush up on some skills more than others. For example, some may benefit more from soft skills training whereas others would need to gain more technical insights on the negotiation issue they are going to cover.

In devising a capacity-building programme it is also worth thinking beyond the negotiations team: other staff of the Presidency structure, such as those working on public relations and communications, should also understand the fundamentals of the process.

The following sections delineate key insights from the combination of capacity-building approaches the UAE used and which builds on tailored learning tools, personal exposure to the negotiations, and external support (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Capacity build and support



Recommendations

- Devise a structured onboarding process. Make sure that everyone, regardless of when they join the team, gets access to the training material, and identify alternative training opportunities where needed.
- Ideally, ensure that people have a dedicated learning phase to maximize the effectiveness of the capacity-building programme and foster a gentle onboarding.
- Tailor capacity building to individual peoples' needs, as far as possible. Ensure sufficient time for feedback to support staff development.
- Provide guidelines, and where needed skills training, for those in managerial positions.
- Make sure everyone understands the national position and the motivation for engaging in the process (incl. anticipated risks and expected benefits).
- Ensure that everyone—not just the negotiators—understands the fundamentals of the process at hand (esp. those in charge of communication).

5.1 INTERNAL TRAINING

At the outset, the UAE's Negotiations team prepared a comprehensive “one-stop-shop” handbook, consolidating essential information on the climate change negotiations and the issues under discussion. Such a handbook is not only a great primer for people who are new to the process, it also provides guidance on how to communicate and helps create alignment within the team. The handbook can be designed as a “living document” in which the team members regularly update the sections on the negotiation issues they are in charge of. This would make the handbook a repository of all key information on the negotiations and may increase issue ownership among the negotiators. Collective reflection sessions can further help to increase the handbook's uptake and impact.

Dedicated capacity-building workshops have a similar but complementary function to the handbook. Introductory sessions can serve to convey basic insights on climate science and the UNFCCC process, including the role of the Presidency, with follow-up sessions to dig deeper on the various negotiation issues and expectations for the specific COP session. Collectively, these knowledge-oriented sessions may help team members better digest the information contained in the handbook. Practice-oriented sessions then serve to address concrete negotiation strategies and train cross-cutting skills, such as tailoring messages to specific audiences. Participants benefit most from these workshops when they are well-aligned with their learning trajectory, meaning that the training takes place before the team has to take an active role in the negotiations. In-person training is especially useful for practice-oriented sessions, as these are more hands-on and typically include group exercises. It is also worth thinking about recording the workshops so that these recordings can be shared with staff members that may join the team at later stages. Such workshops would typically be provided by external consultants with expertise in the UNFCCC process.

Contrary to the consultants who delivered only individual workshops, the advisors were working with the team on a full time-basis: **The advisors provide on-the-job training** by sharing historical insights into the negotiation dynamics, supporting the team members within negotiations, and discussing how to interpret other countries' positions and priorities. Beyond these more substantive matters, they provided cross-cutting skills training, including on how to best report information to the leadership level, how to draft speaking points, and how to speak as the Presidency—and when best not to speak. In the UAE's case, each advisor's approach differed to some extent, some had a more structured training process than others and some advisors engaged on a more hands-on basis while others rather served as go-to resource persons which the negotiators could ask for support whenever needed.

Furthermore, some measures primarily geared towards internal communication and strategy development also supported team members' capacity building. The team for example used a **reporting template with which negotiators regularly shared information** on the issue(s) they covered. The template was structured in such a way that it pushed negotiators to synthesise recent developments in an analytical manner, identify the essence of countries' positions, and formulate succinct messages to inform the negotiations' leadership. The team also conducted **internal workshops to discuss countries' positions across negotiation issues and map possible negotiation pathways and scenarios**, including projections on what it could take to reach agreement on thorny issues. This helped the team members better understand the various negotiation issues and the interlinkages between them. It also made them think more strategically about how to engage with counterparts from other countries.

Recommendations

- Think about a phased approach to capacity building, for example:
 - 1) basics of the subject matter (climate change, biodiversity, water, etc.) and the relevant multilateral process;
 - 2) detailed overview of the negotiation issues and expectations for the specific meeting;
 - 3) practice-oriented skills training on negotiation techniques;
 - 4) cross-cutting skills training, such as tailoring messaging to specific audiences.
- Commission or develop a handbook that serves as a one-stop-shop repository for all key information on the negotiations. Ideally, keep it updated throughout the Presidency process.

5.2 IMMERSIVE CAPACITY BUILDING

In addition to formal training, the Presidency embedded a “learning by doing” approach, giving team members direct exposure by participating in the negotiations. This provides an opportunity for staff to observe how countries deliver their statements, how negotiation text is being drafted, what the overall rhythm of negotiations is, and how a Presidency engages in the process, among others. UAE negotiators also underscored that engaging with representatives from small island developing states and least developed countries reinforced their understanding of the urgency and seriousness of the challenges.

New members were rapidly integrated into high-level negotiations, enabling them to contribute meaningfully from their first session. The diplomatic formulations used in such settings often seem obscure to newcomers, who struggle with grasping the significance of what is being said. The widespread use of acronyms in the climate negotiations makes the discussions even harder to decipher.

Again, timing is important: the negotiations will be more intelligible for people who had a chance to learn the basics of the UNFCCC process before attending their first meeting and they will in turn get more out of this practical learning opportunity. This means that **formal training should ideally take place before engaging in immersive capacity building.**

It also makes a difference when in the Presidency process people attend their first negotiation meeting. In the case of the UAE’s COP28 Presidency, some negotiators joined the team in time to participate in COP 27. This allowed them to experience the process without being in the spotlight, to “test the waters” as an interviewee put it. By the time of the Subsidiary Bodies’ subsequent June meeting, all eyes were already on the UAE as the incoming Presidency. This means that new negotiators could not simply observe, they immediately had to “go on stage as the Presidency.”

Such immersive capacity building does not have to be confined to the large negotiation sessions. Team members may also benefit from participating in smaller intersessional workshops on the issues they are assigned to cover or even events beyond the remit of the UNFCCC, such as negotiations under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, or related processes. The UAE also had a number of negotiators spend two weeks at the UNFCCC Secretariat. This proved to be a useful opportunity for them to get to know “the back office” of the process, better understand the issue they were assigned to, and build connections with the respective Secretariat staff that would support them throughout the Presidency process.

Recommendations

- Leverage opportunities for immersive capacity building both within the process at hand and related events.
- Ideally, staff should already have a basic understanding of the process before joining such events.
- Provide opportunities for short-term secondments to key partners (e.g. UN organisation in charge of the process).
- Be clear about expectations (learning, networking). Provide guidelines on how to interact with partners for all key information on the negotiations. Ideally, keep it updated throughout the Presidency process.

5.3 BROADER SUPPORT NETWORK



Taking on the Presidency of the climate change negotiations requires convening and coordinating a wide network of partners, and the UAE actively leveraged this global support to strengthen delivery.

The UNFCCC Secretariat is the centrepiece of this support network, offering institutional knowledge and process expertise. **The Secretariat staff are invaluable resource persons for the negotiators** and can share insights on parties' positions, the history of negotiation issues, and the process' rules of procedure and legal aspects. Beyond this capacity-building aspect, the Secretariat also provides strategic advice and practical support during the negotiations, such as by proactively sharing information and helping the negotiators identify key players to talk to across negotiation issues. The Presidency also worked with the Secretariat when preparing and refining draft negotiating texts to ensure procedural alignment. More generally, Presidencies liaise with the Secretariat to coordinate communication with the parties and logistics planning. In terms of timing, future Presidencies should keep in mind the Secretariat's workload in the lead up to and during the Subsidiary Bodies' meeting in June and especially the COP.

There is also great value for the incoming Presidency to **reach out to and seek advice from previous presidencies**. The UAE proactively engaged past COP Presidencies to gain insights that informed its narrative, strategy, and approach to stakeholder engagement. Those who have held the COP Presidency in the past can share valuable insights into their respective journeys, which will help the team define a Presidency narrative and engagement strategy. Other countries, especially delegations that have a strong standing in the climate change negotiations, can for their part share insights on their approach to capacity building and other matters that may help the Presidency fulfil its role. It also helps to engage with partner countries early on to identify who the Presidency may enlist to conduct ministerial consultations on the COP's key negotiation issues.

Finally, The UAE integrated ministerial staff and diplomats-in-training into key stages of the process, expanding capacity and ensuring institutional alignment. This helped broaden the ranks of the negotiations team for the negotiation sessions of the Subsidiary Bodies in June and later for the COP itself. To maximize the effectiveness of this temporary support, a clear task allocation and proper hand-over before and after the sessions is key.

Recommendations

- Build a good relationship with and leverage support from the UNFCCC Secretariat (or whichever organisation is in charge of the process you are engaging in).
- Reach out to other countries to get insights into their approach to the Presidency and their strategy for engaging in the process. For all key information on the negotiations. Ideally, keep it updated throughout the Presidency process.



6. INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Effective communication and coordination are critical to successfully carry out the Presidency of the climate change negotiations—not only with regard to parties and stakeholders, which will be addressed later in the report, but also within the Presidency itself.

Two complementary tools to foster this are written reports and regular coordination meetings among the negotiators. As already mentioned, the UAE’s team developed a **reporting template which negotiators filled out to keep the team updated about developments on their respective negotiation issues**. The objective of such reporting is not to have a verbatim-like transcript of parties’ statements, but to generate concise and outcome-oriented overviews that inform the Presidency’s engagement strategy. A key aspect of the UAE’s template which other countries may want to emulate was its **“traffic light” system through which the negotiators categorised the state of play on their respective agenda items and flagged a possible need for intervention by leadership**.

Regular coordination meetings in turn provide a space for the team to reflect on the developments in the negotiation process, discuss potential interlinkages between the different issues, and seek guidance whenever needed. The idea is not for the negotiators to repeat what they wrote in their reports, but to flag especially important matters and proactively point to potential hurdles in the negotiations. The frequency of both the written reporting and the coordination meetings should be adjusted throughout the Presidency journey. While a lower frequency might be sufficient in the beginning, the frequency of such meeting may need to be increased during the negotiation sessions. These meetings enable team members to contribute ideas, raise challenges and flag opportunities for progress.

Secure and rapid communication channels ensured real-time coordination during fast-moving negotiations. However, negotiators may find themselves part of dozens of communication channels, which can create challenges in maintaining an overview of relevant information. To address this, countries may want to create priority channels of communication in order to **bring issues to the attention of negotiators in a timely manner**. The UAE had one person in charge of such a group’s moderation to ensure this means of communication remains reserved for only the important and time sensitive issues—a precondition to foster a quick reaction whenever needed.

While a large share of the negotiations is conducted at a more technical level, interventions by political decision makers are typically needed to reach a compromise on the most entrenched and politically charged issues and deliver a final agreement. **Effective communication between the negotiators and their leadership is therefore essential for success**. This is true for all countries, but especially so for the COP Presidency whose very role is to facilitate agreement between parties.

Fundamentally, national leaders need to understand the negotiations and the unique mandate and role of COP Presidencies, ensuring strategic alignment at all levels. In the UAE’s case it was helpful that several of the country’s decision makers participated in previous COPs. Ministers’ participation in the pre-COP was also deemed helpful, especially as it clarified partner countries’ priorities for the negotiations.

Evidently, the COP President plays a key role in the Presidency journey. The UAE's experience shows the value of having a COP President with a strong standing and access to ministers and international partners. This helps maximize the Presidency's potential contribution to the process. It also showed **what difference it makes for the COP President to be accessible and reactive when the negotiations team reaches out for support**. In the UAE's case, it allowed the team to quickly intervene in the negotiations on the new loss and damage fund: The Transitional Committee, which was the body tasked by parties with developing a recommendation on the operationalization of the fund, could not reach agreement at its last scheduled session, with discussions inconclusive at 2:00 AM. The Presidency team immediately sought and got the COP President's support for organising an additional session, during which the Committee indeed managed to agree on a recommendation which was later adopted by the COP.

Finally, while it is virtually inevitable that team members will at times feel overwhelmed during the Presidency process, aspects such as **a good feedback culture and team bonding facilitate more effective communication and contribute to upholding morale in challenging moments**. Time for feedback becomes scarcer as the negotiations advance and lack of time is most pronounced once negotiations are largely conducted at a more political level, which makes transparency and collegiality critically important for success. In this regard, the practice of **recognition by leadership**—be it in motivational speeches or formal forms of government recognition—should not be underestimated, especially for staff members who strongly view their engagement in the Presidency process as a service to their country.



Recommendations

- Ensure good flow of information among all team members, incl. those working on a part-time basis or supporting the team only in a time-bound manner.
- Define guidelines and templates for internal reporting. If needed, provide capacity building to foster more analytical reporting and tailored messaging for specific audiences, such as leadership levels.
- Provide a space for regular, open, and outcome-oriented discussions. Ensure complementarity between the written reporting and coordination meetings.
- Adapt the frequency of the written reporting and coordination meeting to the pace of developments in the negotiations. During negotiation sessions, the coordination meeting should take place on a daily basis.
- Establish a communication channel reserved for urgent matters that require leadership's attention.
- Brief political leaders about the process, the Presidency's mandate, and expected challenges.
- Ensure that leadership is reachable and reactive to respond to emerging needs for intervention.
- Manage the team's workload and provide guidance on task prioritisation. Ensure sufficient time for feedback.
- Foster a positive team spirit. Provide space for informal bonding opportunities and ensure team members feel appreciated.
- Leverage the motivational power of leadership recognition.

7. THE NEGOTIATION PROCESSES



The centrepiece of a country’s journey as COP Presidency is its engagement in the negotiation process as such. The following sections delineate insights from the UAE’s overall approach to the COP28 Presidency, the way the team built relations with parties and stakeholders, and how it facilitated consensus on the various negotiation issues.

7.1 OVERALL APPROACH

Any country accepting this role in climate negotiations should **consider what sort of Presidency it aims to be** (see section 3). The UAE recognised differing positions within the UNFCCC process and prioritised building convergence and fostering constructive engagement.

Against this background, the COP President conducted an extensive listening tour to **engage with parties and stakeholders building trust and mapping pathways towards a shared, ambitious outcome**. As one interviewee put it, the COP28 Presidency was “very active silently.” By hearing parties out, the team built a knowledge base that laid the ground for developing a shared understanding and definition of what a successful outcome to the conference would be. Building on this, the team created a campaign aimed at **mobilizing support for an ambitious outcome and putting emphasizing parties shared responsibility for success**. Regularly published “Presidency’s letters” served to chart out expectations on the various agenda items.

As part of the campaign towards mobilising collective support for an ambitious outcome, the UAE decided to **appoint ministerial pairs for consultations on key negotiation issues ahead of the COP itself**. This means that in addition to the Presidency itself, political decision makers from developed and developing countries were already working towards facilitating consensus between parties in the lead up to the COP.

Knowing how much friction cover decisions created in previous years, the Presidency also decided early on that there would be none at COP28. This ensured that both parties and the Presidency kept their attention directed towards the issues on the negotiation agenda, especially the conclusion of the first Global Stocktake under the Paris Agreement which was the conference’s main expected output.

Recommendations

- Devise an overall strategy for engaging in the process.
- Liaise with countries and other stakeholders early on to get insights about their expectations towards the process and build trust.
- Develop a shared definition of what a successful outcome would be. Building on this, be clear and consistent in outward messaging. Put emphasis on partners’ shared responsibility for success.
- Use every tool available to minimise friction in the process. Identify potential hurdles and address these early on.

7.2 RELATIONSHIP WITH PARTIES AND STAKEHOLDERS

The role of the COP Presidency is to foster agreement in the negotiations, which required building relationships with parties and across all negotiating groups. While some Presidencies inherit extensive pre-existing networks, the UAE worked to expand and deepen its relationships with all stakeholders to reflect its bridge-building approach. The objective was to reflect the genuine interest in all perspectives, and to build confidence in the Presidency's impartiality and convening power.

The negotiators built a list of contacts to reach out to with regard to their assigned negotiation issue. They used a snowball method whereby they asked initial contacts to direct them towards other relevant stakeholders, sometimes going through issue-specific focal points within the negotiation coalitions. Advisors worked alongside the team to accelerate outreach and facilitate introductions to key influencers in each negotiation stream.

It is important to emphasize the crucial importance of the informal relations that the Presidency's negotiators build with partners in the lead up to the COP for fostering conducive negotiations. **Good interpersonal relations make partners more inclined to share information and be frank about their red lines. Trust is key for the Presidency to be able to broker trade-offs and facilitate agreement on a package deal.** To this end, it is useful for the Presidency as a whole and individual negotiators within their respective issue contexts to **create low stakes spaces for countries to engage with each other ahead of the COP.** The UAE's experience shows that these relations can perdure well beyond a country's term as a Presidency.

Recommendations

- Invest time and resources in building trusted relationships with parties and stakeholders. To this end, meet people face-to-face and maintain an open line of communication.
- Provide space for low stakes, informal discussions with and among parties.

7.3 FACILITATING CONSENSUS

With an ever-increasing number of agenda items to be addressed in the climate change negotiations, it is key for the COP Presidencies to **identify priorities that maximise negotiation impact.** What are the key expected outcomes of the COP? What are the especially challenging issues? This depends on the mandate of discussions at the specific meeting: Some discussions are backward looking and do not provide for the same potential breakthroughs as negotiations aimed at setting up new processes and charting out the course of action on a given subject for years to come. Similarly, discussions on yearly reports are typically less contentious than the more thorough reviews of constituted bodies, which are conducted every so often. Also, it is important to take into account the fact that countries and country coalitions have different priorities. Some are more invested in mitigation-related issues, others in adaptation, for example. The importance that they attribute to individual agenda items and specific elements within those discussions plays into the formation of strategic linkages, which is when countries condition their agreement on one agenda item upon other countries' compromise in discussions on another item—something the Presidency needs to mediate to foster consensus. These aspects should factor into the Presidency's reflection on issue prioritization. The prioritization should be done early, so as to inform the definition of the team structure, especially with regard to how many staff members will be assigned to cover priority issues. The prioritization will form the cornerstone of the Presidency's engagement strategy and guide leadership attention, knowing that developments in the negotiations may call for adjustments.

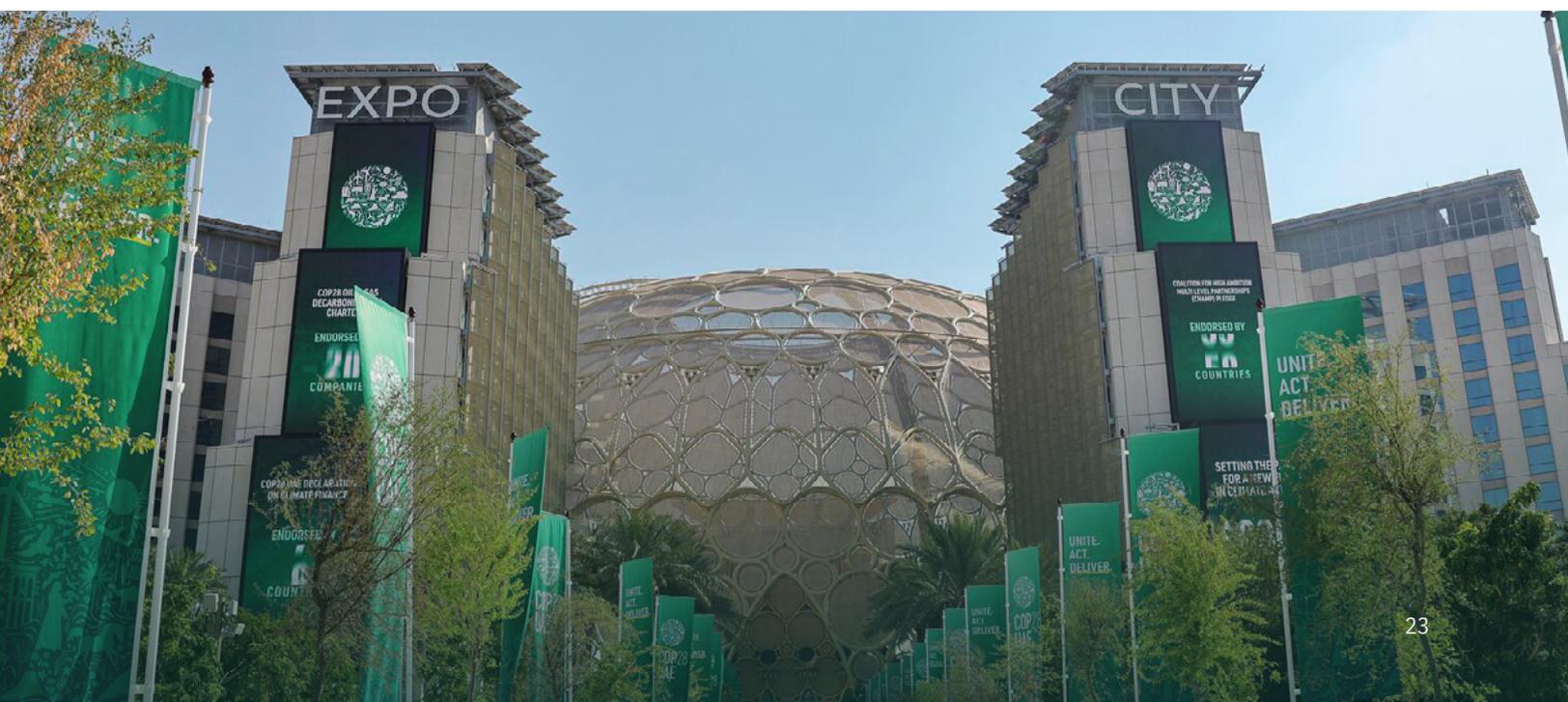
It is important for the team to **be mindful of interlinkages between agenda items** throughout the negotiation process. These are not only of strategic nature. There are also: substantive linkages, when agenda items touch upon the same overall issue; and institutional linkages, when discussions under different agenda items touch upon the same institution. Lack of progress on one agenda item may jeopardize agreement on others, regardless of the nature of the interlinkages between them. The Presidency should be mindful and attend to these interlinkages to mitigate delays in finalising agreements.

Throughout the process, the Presidency needs **to identify when to push and when best not to interfere**. Recognising the sensitivity of the loss and damage fund discussions, the COP28 Presidency ensured the Transitional Committee had the time and space needed to reach agreement. The UAE also opted not to chart out concrete proposals as to the shape of the just transition work programme—even when some parties enquired about the Presidency’s stands on the matter at the June negotiation session. Keeping up with the party-driven nature of the process is essential to maintain overall trust and **Presidency interventions should be thought-through, well-timed, and well-dosed**.

Interventions may start with offering clarity regarding the progress of the process. The UAE for example held briefings on the loss and damage fund operationalisation to keep civil society representatives updated about developments in the Transitional Committee and the matter was spotlighted in the COP President’s letters to parties and stakeholders. This is a valuable exercise in transparency, which also contributes to keeping up the pressure to reach agreement. It is also common practice for the Presidency to **hold Stocktaking Plenaries during the second week of the COP when the finalisation of negotiations is solely under the Governing Bodies to keep everyone informed about developments across negotiation items**. This is especially key at the stage at which negotiations on thorny issues are conducted behind the scenes through shuttle diplomacy. In a somewhat similar vein, some Presidencies, including the UAE, have resorted to invoking single-setting meetings where high-level party representatives, such as ministers or heads of delegation, are invited to engage with each other to unlock progress. While these may not bring forward many concrete proposals, such settings bring disagreements out in the open and can bring about a shift in the tone of discussion.

Sometimes, **organizing an additional session for parties to come together before the COP can make a significant difference in the negotiation outcome**. When discussions fell apart at the end of the Transitional Committee’s last scheduled session, the UAE for example immediately proposed to organise an additional, fifth session back-to-back with the pre-COP. Many parties were already planning to come to the UAE for that event, which helped with the logistics planning for the impromptu loss and damage meeting. At this fifth session, the Committee then indeed managed to agree on a recommendation for the operationalization of the loss and damage fund. The same held for the Global Goal on Adaptation: the team organized a meeting back-to-back with an intersessional workshop taking place in another country. It provided space for frank, informal discussions under Chatham House rules. Evidently, Presidencies need to be able to rise to the occasion and should therefore **keep buffer capacity to address event planning contingencies**. If needed, for example due to financial constraints, Presidencies should consider enlisting the support of others to organize such meetings.

The Presidency needs to monitor parties’ position on key negotiation issues throughout the Presidency process: it is important for the team to **identify potentially dissenting countries, discern any persistent concerns, and seek ways to assuage these**. This can be achieved through various means. Mild reservations may be dissipated simply through focused discussion on matters of concern. The Presidency may need to provide targeted reassurances to address concerns, strengthen trust, and enable constructive participation from all parties. Stronger opposition in turn requires the Presidency to broker trade-offs and thus engage with a wider set of countries to pave the way for agreement at the COP.



The appropriate form of Presidency intervention varies across agenda items and there is no universal recipe for success. The UAE’s negotiators approached their role differently, depending on the issue they were assigned to as well as their personal predisposition. Some were more cautious and largely remained in a listening mode, others opted to “throw darts and see what lands,” for example by mobilising actors outside the UNFCCC context and reflecting on what the UAE itself could offer to foster progress.

Ideally, parties should manage to draft agreeable negotiating texts among themselves, with the help of Co-Facilitators and the Secretariat. However, when parties are at a stalemate, it may be time for the Presidency to step up its engagement. It should **conduct shuttle diplomacy**, which means engaging directly with countries and negotiation coalitions to identify their individual red lines and gauge their readiness to compromise on specific elements dear to others. Whether a Presidency’s initiative to **table new text** is well received depends on parties’ trust in the Presidency, the timing for such an action and the extent to which its proposed draft captures and addresses conflicting parties’ key demands.

Another important form of Presidency intervention is to **identify which issues should be addressed at a more political level and when this should be the case.** While most issues can be addressed effectively at a more technical level, some may require early interventions by heads of delegation and some may benefit from ministerial engagement. The Presidency needs to define this task division with the aim to maximize progress. Typically, the Presidency invites ministers to sort out the particularly contentious issues sometime during the second week of the COP. In some cases, it may be worthwhile to conduct negotiations in several tracks, that is with negotiations largely continuing at the technical level, but with ministerial engagement on particularly contentious issues thereon.

Overall, it is key for the Presidency to **keep an overview of progress across agenda items and gauge when draft texts on individual items may be ready to be submitted for adoption.** The closing plenary in the climate change negotiations often happens in a staggered manner. Decisions on the more “low hanging fruits” may be ready to be adopted while negotiations are still ongoing on other issues. Prompting the adoption of the firsts can provide a boost to morale and it frees up capacity to address the more contentious ones. At times, especially when there are many trade-offs across agenda items, the Presidency may **decide to table several draft decisions as a balanced “package deal.”** This aims to mitigate the risk that parties undo the trade-offs brokered to foster agreement across the outstanding issues. However, it is ultimately up to the parties to decide whether they are willing to accept the proposed compromise.

Recommendations

- Gain a detailed understanding of issues under discussion, including interlinkages between them and the extent to which individual issues are considered priorities (in the process, at the specific meeting, and by individual countries). Develop scenarios to chart out possible pathways for the negotiations, paying due attention to potential ripple effects between issues. Use these reflections to define an issue prioritization that guides the Presidency’s overall engagement.
- Devise a strategy for engaging on each issue, specifically when to stay back and when to push and through what means.
- Monitor progress and be ready to quickly intervene. Have an open line of communication with leadership levels to address such emerging needs and have support on stand-by, incl. logistics support.
- Identify individual countries’ concerns and try to remedy them to pave the way for agreement. This can be achieved in various ways, including through rational persuasion and offering tradeoffs on other matters.
- Think about leveraging engagement by others (e.g. political decision makers, partner countries, civil society) and providing a space for informal discussions to foster progress.
- Provide space for regular stocktaking of progress, especially when negotiations move to behind the scenes and are largely conducted through shuttle diplomacy.
- Identify which issues should be addressed at a more political level and when this should be the case.
- Keep an overview of progress across agenda items and gauge when draft texts on individual items may be ready to be submitted for adoption. If needed, table some draft decisions as a package deal.
- Strive to maintain partners’ trust throughout the process.



8. OUTLOOK

Taking on the Presidency of the climate change negotiations is no easy feat, but it is a unique opportunity for countries to contribute to advancing progress in a multilateral process whose effectiveness will define future pathways for life on earth. Every COP session is an opportunity for the world's nations to come together, take stock of progress, and devise next steps for multilateral climate action. The Presidency plays a pivotal role in supporting and shaping this process, balancing technical negotiations with political leadership to unlock consensus. Not only can the Presidency push for ambitious outcomes but it is also up to the Presidency to facilitate the negotiations and broker trade-offs whenever needed to reach consensus.

The UAE's experience demonstrates how any country, with the right strategy and leadership, can take on this challenge and succeed. The report leverages some important lessons learnt from the UAE's journey as COP28 Presidency to provide recommendations on bidding, staff recruitment, team structuring, capacity building, communication, and how to engage in the negotiation process as such. Such insights may be relevant for any country or stakeholder aiming to enhance engagement in multilateral environmental negotiations and deliver meaningful outcomes.

The Presidency of the climate change negotiations rotates between the five UN regions on a yearly basis. This gives countries time to prepare their bid and ensure their staff is ready to take on this challenging task. Who wants to go next?

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