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Behind the Scenes: Unveiling Paradiplomacy in the Climate Conference of the Parties

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ANA ALMEIDA-DIAS, DEC 15 2024

The Conference of the Parties (COPs) is the key decision-making forum under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which lays the foundation for the international climate regime and drives global efforts to address the climate challenge. As a dynamic platform for action, COP convenes high-level negotiators alongside non-state actors, fostering collaboration across sectors. Subnational governments play a crucial role through paradiplomacy, leveraging side events and partnerships to advocate for ambitious climate policies and shape meaningful policy outcomes.

The Conference of the Parties serves as a global platform under the UNFCCC, uniting nearly 200 states to engage in formal negotiations and advance collective efforts to address climate change. Since its inception in 1995, COP has served as an international stage for countries to assess progress, share strategies, and negotiate commitments to reduce emissions and combat climate change. The forum functions through a combination of high-level plenaries, where overarching decisions are debated and adopted, and technical negotiations in smaller working groups, where delegates craft detailed final agreements.

As the climate crisis deepens, COPs have become a governance stage, also serving as a hub for non-state actors participating in side events, exhibitions, and informal consultations. Increasingly, the international activities of subnational governments (i.e., regional and local governments) – conceptualized as paradiplomacy – have emerged as vital to these discussions. Through informal participation in COPs, they put forward concrete paradiplomacy strategies and interactions to influence global (climate) policy outcomes.

A Conceptual Framework of Analysis

Although subnational actors are not part of formal COP negotiations, they still play an important role in influencing global climate policies by promoting and demanding stronger climate commitments (i.e., advocacy). To explain how such reality takes place, we start by highlighting the specific paradiplomacy instruments (i.e., public policy tools to engage in international activities) through which regions and cities participate in global forums, followed by the modes of interaction (i.e., how engagement with others takes place) they endorse during climate COPs.

First, subnational actors may represent themselves in such international gatherings via intra-state and/ or extra-state routes. To clarify, intra-state routes involve being represented within the federal or central government's delegation at the COP. In contrast, extra-state routes refer to subnational governments autonomously sending their own delegation to participate in non-official side events and strategic meetings, as will be further explained.

Second, the mentioned paradiplomacy strategies are intended to raise awareness of climate issues and showcase their local initiatives via non-official interactions with other participating entities throughout the COP to increase their influence. These paradiplomacy interactions take place in two main ways: (1) collectively, by engaging in networks with other regions, cities, and organizations, which helps amplify their voices and advocate for stronger climate commitments, and (2) individually, by (2.1.) engaging within their central government's delegation or by (2.2.) autonomously engaging with other stakeholders in the COP process to highlighting their own interests either.

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Collectively, subnational governments participate in networks' side events such as workshops, panels, and gatherings to emphasize their collective efforts. Individually, they collaborate with their national state to align policies and influence the national positioning during negotiation or autonomously engage in strategic meetings with counterparts like international organizations, civil society groups, and NGOs, as well as dialogues with other cities and regions to develop shared climate strategies and future partnerships.

By bridging the paradiplomacy strategies with modes of interaction, we notice that these are interrelated and define the type of engagement of different subnational governments during COPs. Paradiplomacy instruments—intra-state routes and extra-state routes—are public policy tools through which subnational governments engage in international activities. These instruments differ in terms of how subnational governments interact within or beyond the framework of their national governments (See Table 1):

Strategies and interactions are interrelated, as they represent complementary approaches for subnational actors to enhance their influence. Intra-state routes leverage national representation to align interests, while extra-state routes expand their outreach through both individual and collaborative efforts. While corresponding to different paradiplomacy and respective modes of interaction, these not exclusive and different combinations may be adopted by regions and cities. Together, they highlight the multifaceted ways subnational governments participate in global climate governance.

They do this by raising awareness of climate issues and showcasing their local initiatives via non-official interactions throughout the COP. These paradiplomacy interactions take place in two main ways: (1) collectively, by participating in networks with other regions, cities, and organizations, which helps amplify their voices and advocate for stronger climate commitments, and (2) individually, by engaging directly with other stakeholders in the COP process to highlighting their own interests. Collectively, subnational governments participate in networks' side events such as workshops, panels, and gatherings to emphasize their collective efforts. Individually, they collaborate with their national state to align policies or autonomously engage in strategic meetings with counterparts like international organizations, civil society groups, and NGOs, as well as dialogues with other cities and regions to develop shared climate strategies.

Intra-state Routes: Individual Modes of Interactions

When adopting intra-state routes as part of their paradiplomacy strategies, subnational governments act through their inclusion in the federal or national delegation to advocate for their priorities. In these cases, subnational actors participate in the COP process under the umbrella of their national government, using the delegation as a platform to represent their interests and influence global climate discussions.

During COPs, individual interactions under intra-state routes often manifest in strategy meetings and consultations between subnational and national representatives. For instance, subnational actors may meet with federal negotiators to provide updates on local progress, propose regional solutions, or advocate for greater ambition in national climate commitments. Beyond internal meetings, they may also serve as advisors or contributors within the broader national delegation, participating in panels, technical workshops, or policy briefings on behalf of their government. In the case of Canada, for instance, the provinces of British Columbia and Ontario have continuously joined the Canadian delegation since 1992 up to 2021 (as most up-to-date sources). Similarly, the President of the Zagreb City Assembly participated in COP29 as a speaker focusing on National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and the contributions of local authorities in shaping them. The discussion emphasized the critical role of regions and cities in addressing local adaptation needs and the importance of aligning them with broader national adaptation strategies. Another example is provided by the city of Glasgow, the host of COP26. The local government worked with the Scottish and UK governments to align its urban climate strategies with national energy efficiency targets, evidencing that cities can serve as platforms for advancing national goals in urban contexts.

By embedding themselves in the national delegations, subnational governments leveraging intra-state routes can magnify their influence and ensure that their perspectives shape the overarching climate policies presented by their national state on the global stage.

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Extra-state Routes: Collective and Individual Modes of Interactions

As mentioned, when endorsing extra-state routes as part of their paradiplomacy strategy, subnational entities operate as actors in the representation of their own position. Through their own delegation, regions and cities may choose to participate in COP using collective and individual interactions, most of the time taking the opportunity to endorse both modes to increase their chances of influence.

Collective interaction takes place through collaborative platforms called transnational networks. According to the literature, these are described as informal cross-border interactions involving at least one non-state actor or an entity not representing a national government or intergovernmental organization. By interacting through such collaborative platforms, each delegation of subnational governments integrates a united front that emphasizes ambitious policies and shares innovative solutions for tackling climate change. Prominent examples of networks include the Regions4 or the under2Coalition, which unite jurisdictions committed to strong climate action, often surpassing national government pledges. By collaborating and presenting a united front, these subnational governments influence the climate dialogue, emphasizing the significance of ambitious policies and sharing successful strategies for tackling climate change.

Outside COPs, networks facilitate knowledge-sharing and collective initiatives regarding climate policy. Yet, during COPs, they organize insider activities to share best practices among participants, such as workshops, panels, and roundtable discussions where subnational leaders and experts engage in discussions on specific climate topics, share best practices, and showcase successful initiatives. Recent examples include the set of panels organized by Regions4 during COP28 and COP29, the Local Climate Action Summit (LCAS) during COP28, and the Under2 Coalition General Assembly, which occurred alongside COP29 in Baku. Besides these activities, there are also opportunities to connect and form partnerships between networks and other stakeholders to demonstrate collaborative commitments and emphasize collective ambition. A clear expression of such activity concerns the C40 partnership and NUS Cities at COP29 focused on urban climate resilience. Additionally, policy briefings are also a result of collective interactions. The latter intends to inform decision-makers about the importance of subnational action while advocating for higher commitments, such as the letter endorsed by mayors, governors, and subnational leaders under C40, as well as the Regions4 Progress Report 2024 published during COP29. Through a single collective voice, the interaction of subnational actors via networks creates momentum and encourages negotiating parties to adopt more ambitious policies themselves.

On the other hand, individual interactions within extra-state routes occur through direct engagement by delegations of subnational governments with a variety of state and non-state actors present in the COP, including international organizations, states, NGOs, private sector representatives, as well as other subnational entities. These interactions are characterized by independent efforts to promote their delegation's policies, initiatives, and commitments to addressing climate change. By acting autonomously, subnational delegations showcase their unique contributions, foster tailored partnerships, and position themselves as influential actors in global climate governance.

In this case, activities include discussions with the different stakeholders regarding diverse topics (emissions reduction, climate finance, renewable energies, and green economy, among others). We may identify strategic meetings to advocate bilateral and multilateral collaborations and partnerships with international organizations, civil society, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but also dialogues with other cities and regions to foster future collaborations on shared climate strategies.

An example of such proactive bilateral engagement was demonstrated by California at COP23, where it emphasized its commitment to maintaining close dialogue with the EU on the development and implementation of carbon markets. During COP28, California's delegation has also launched two new international climate multilateral partnerships and joining one: The Subnational Methane Action Coalition (a partnership of subnational governments that are committed to reducing methane), the Mediterranean Climate Action Partnership (Statement of Commitment to establish the Mediterranean Climate Action Partnership); and the Global Offshore Wind Alliance (a coalition aiming to generate 380 gigawatts (GW) of offshore wind energy by 2030, aligning with California's own renewable energy goals). At this COP, Québec's delegation, Lithium Universe, and Investissement Québec held strategic discussions on using green

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hydroelectric power from Hydro-Québec for an eco-friendly lithium refinery hub, set to produce 16,000 tonnes of battery-grade lithium carbonate annually, boosting North America’s supply. A more recent example is given by Malaysian Johor state and Japan’s Saitama city, who signed a memorandum of bilateral cooperation during COP29 on the sustainable use of wood.

Final Remarks

The Conference of the Parties (COP) under the UNFCCC has evolved into a critical platform where subnational governments actively influence global climate policies through paradiplomacy. Despite the lack of formal representation, subnational authorities play a crucial role at the Conference of the Parties (COP), with active engagement in the evolving global climate governance framework. By engaging via intra-state and extra-state routes, regions and cities help bridge the gap between local needs and global commitments, aligning grassroots innovation with international strategies. These actions enhance climate governance by amplifying diverse perspectives, fostering more inclusive solutions, and ensuring local realities inform global decisions within the COP.

Contributions from regional and local governments enrich the global dialogue, fostering more representative decision-making processes. Moreover, showcasing local successes at COPs encourages the replication of effective strategies, stimulates partnerships, and strengthens collective ambition. By integrating subnational perspectives, COPs becomes more than a venue for high-level negotiations—it transforms into a dynamic space where collaboration across governance levels accelerates the transition to sustainable and climate-resilient futures. This multidimensional approach, combining global commitments with subnational engagement, is indispensable for addressing the urgent and complex challenges of the climate crisis.

Table 1. Paradiplomacy Instruments and Modes of Interaction during COPs.

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(1) **Intra-state routes** involve subnational governments participating as part of their federal government's delegation at international forums like COPs. Their engagement is primarily individual, focusing on exclusive interactions with the central state to align and promote their regional interests within national policies.

(2) **Extra-state routes**, on the other hand, allow subnational governments to act independently, outside their national government's framework, by sending their own delegations. This engagement happens in two modes:

- **Collective:** Subnational governments join networks to collaborate and amplify their voices through shared efforts.
- **Individual:** They independently engage with a wide range of stakeholders, such as international organizations, NGOs, and other subnational entities, to promote their specific initiatives.

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