

Germany, multilateralism and the climate crisis

How cooperation can strengthen climate policy

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Global Public Policy Institute Blog Post
English translation

December 2020





Germany, multilateralism and the climate crisis: how cooperation can strengthen climate policy

For climate policy to be successful, cooperation among big emitters is essential. In order to contribute to this, Germany should use its political weight to help bringing existing initiatives in the EU, and G20 to fruition while at the same time initiating and strengthening alliances aiming at concrete transformative measures and innovation. It can also help build knowledge systems that are fit for instigating and supporting change.

Climate advocates around the globe breathed a collective sigh of relief as the result of the United States election were finally announced. President-elect Joe Biden has not only announced the USA's return to the Paris Climate Agreement, but also the intention to reach [net-zero emissions](#) by 2050. China has also expressed the commitment to becoming climate neutral before 2060. In Europe, Ursula von der Leyen has made the climate crisis the centerpiece of her political agenda with the [European Green Deal](#). This accompanies promising trends regarding the expansion of renewable energy, which have shown [remarkable resilience](#) in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Is everything going to be all right? Can Germany now turn its attention to other multilateral issues?

Unfortunately not. We receive almost daily reports of fires, storms, floods. The changing climate is already showing devastating global consequences. Despite the Paris Agreement, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to climb. The World Economic Forum's [Global Risk Report](#) lists the effects of climate change as a major threat, even before terrorism, cyber-attacks or weapons of mass destruction. As a "threat accelerator", global warming has become a prominent issue at the [Munich Security Conference](#), - also in [2020](#). Humankind is apprehensive: according to an international [survey](#), 71 % of respondents consider the threat of climate change to be as fundamental as the coronavirus.

This makes the climate crisis a central topic for multilateralism. The objective must be: a dignified life for the growing global population which is coherent with the [planetary boundaries](#).

The United Nations' [Agenda2030](#) with its [Sustainable Development Goals](#) set the direction. The [Paris Climate Agreement](#) defines the political and legal framework. Scientist outline the necessary emission reduction pathways. Key topics for multilateral cooperation include climate-friendly energy supply, environmentally-compatible mobility, CO₂ pricing, coal phase-out, sustainable supply chains and finance, land-use, forestry and food systems. However, the most current hot topic is: [Green Recovery](#).

In the following, I concentrate on aspects of climate protection. However, I do want to note that adaptation to the effects of climate change is just as essential.



Climate-related multilateralism must deliver measurable impact in the coming five years

Multilateral processes can take decades to bear fruit. However, the next five to ten years are crucial for climate mitigation. This timeline should also guide the German government's multilateral efforts to address climate change. It should focus on activities where relevant successes can be expected in the next five years, or at the least, before 2030.

For example, as reforms of the World Trade Organization (WTO) can be expected to protracted, the focus should be on making bilateral or regional trade agreements climate-friendly. Instead of initiating new international environmental agreements, multilateral effort should aim at partnerships that support ambition and concrete implementation of policy action – including goals, timetables and funding commitments. Relevant international organizations and development banks should be equipped to back these efforts.

Embedded within the European Union, Germany is not acting by itself. While this requires coordination, it also results in a strengthened position in the global playing field. On certain critical issues, such as trade law, the EU even holds the reins. Here, Germany should consistently advocate at European level e.g. for sanctions-based approaches with respect to environmental obligations in trade agreements.

Successful climate protection requires cooperation among big emitters

Looking beyond the borders of the EU, the view shifts to the large-scale greenhouse gas emitters. These include [China, the USA and Russia](#).


The relationship with Russia requires particular bilateral efforts considering the country's geopolitical role, the complexity of German-Russian relations, the Russian dependency on fossil fuel exports and the country's hesitant positioning at the climate negotiations.

The election of Joe Biden signals renewed cooperation opportunities with the USA. While tensions with China might prevail, there is an opportunity to build bridges and work towards a common climate agenda considering the increase in climate-related ambition in China as well. Germany – with the EU – should support this and get involved. 2014/2015 already showcased the importance of alliances among world powers for climate protection. The [agreement between President Obama and President Xi Jinping](#) was an essential building block for the successful adoption of the Paris Agreement.

However, the situation remains fragile. Biden will most likely stand against a Republican majority in the US Senate and is expected to maintain focus on a predominantly domestic agenda. China continues to invest in coal power plants and the announced climate ambition needs to be anchored in the next five-year plan. In the EU, the European Green Deal still has to develop momentum. At this hopeful but vulnerable moment, multilateral cooperation and successes could serve to buoy climate policy.

G20 / G7 – manage expectations while utilizing existing processes and opportunities

The big emitters also play a significant role in the G20. The G20 countries are responsible for nearly [three-quarters of global greenhouse gas emissions](#) and are among the financially strongest countries in the world. But do not expect too much here. Even if



the USA returns to the negotiation table, the governments in Brazil, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey remain challenging partners.

Of course, this is not an invitation for resignation. G20 countries subsidized fossil fuels with [nearly 130 billion USD](#) in 2017 (or an average of [584 billion USD](#) annually from 2017 to 2019 when including indirect support). Germany and its partners should press ahead on the reduction of environmentally harmful subsidies, which has been a topic within the G20 for many years now. Moreover, opportunities should be utilized as they arise: for example, green recovery with the future-oriented objective to “build forward better” should be on the agenda. 2021 may offer unique potentials as European countries hold three presidencies: G20 (Italy), G7 (UK) and the British-Italian double presidency of the UN climate negotiations (COP26).

It remains to be seen whether the opportunities offered by the new US administration will be reflected in the G7. The situation will have become clearer by the German G7 presidency in 2022. However, as those countries particularly affected by climate change do not have a seat at the G7 table, the presidencies should work to ensure that the discourse is guided by the Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement and that the exchange – as has already happened in some cases – extends beyond the G7 inner circle.

Establishing and expanding partnerships with transformative potential

Overcoming the climate crisis is not only about addressing emission levels. This historic task also requires inspiration, innovation and examples of successful transformation. This can be achieved faster and more effectively in alliances.

Along with major economies such as [Japan](#) and [South Korea](#), more than [110 countries](#) have set themselves the goal of becoming climate-neutral by 2050. This developing dynamic opens up multilateral opportunities. The German government should establish or expand partnerships with transformative potential with those players that follow up these announcements with concrete action. International climate summits could become a gathering point for political visibility. The [Powering Past Coal Alliance](#) and the [NDC Partnership](#) (co-initiated by Germany) are successful examples here. Both initiatives were announced at climate summits and now comprise over 100 members (including several G20 states). A concrete example of successful practice-oriented initiatives is the [International Climate Initiative](#), which is funded by Germany from emissions trading proceeds.

Designing knowledge systems with a view to climate protection

To drive fundamental change, forward-looking knowledge systems are needed. The [International Renewables Energy Agency](#), for example, which was co-initiated by Germany, is making a positive contribution in this respect.

Moreover, practice-relevant information and education, for example on sustainable production methods, supply chains, markets and financing options, cannot be forgotten. The necessary knowledge must be easily accessible to both newcomers and those who are expected to change their business models. Innovative formats such as [international farmer-to-farmer exchange](#) can make a contribution here. The German government should help to remove existing structural hurdles at national and international level.



Science and research are also critical. Social sciences are essential for designing successful, targeted social transformation processes. However, according to an [international study](#), only 0.12% of all research funds have been spent in the last 30 years on humanities work in climate protection. Technical and scientific research on climate change received 770% more funding than research in the social sciences. If societies are to undergo fundamental change, governments must support the necessary research to accomplish such transformation.

Last but not least, we can look to lessons learned from the current coronavirus pandemic. Here, science and research have been able to accelerate their work by joining forces beyond well-trodden paths and practices. The German government should also consider how climate-relevant research can be driven forward similarly in a multilateral context.

Diplomatic missions - beacons of climate protection

In terms of consistent and credible climate policy, Germany has the opportunity to create beacons of climate protection with its foreign embassies. Going beyond continuing formats such as "[Climate Talks](#)", diplomatic missions could become pioneers in building efficiency, energy supply, catering, travel, business mobility and procurement. The same applies to consulates, development cooperation infrastructures and Goethe Institutes. Illustrating the possible is an inspiring task with trend-setting potential for an export nation.

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