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## **Abstract**

Our understanding of climate change has expanded to include issues beyond reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, we do not have a sound empirical understanding of how negotiations under the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have evolved to address an increasingly wide range of issues relevant to climate change. To understand what the climate talks have focused on and how the volume of work has changed, the authors create a Climate Negotiations Database that categorizes negotiation agenda items starting from the first UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) in 1995. Overall, the volume of work in the negotiations appears to have steadily increased over time but it is not necessarily tied to the negotiation of new rules. While the negotiations have broadened to include a wider range of issues, we demonstrate that transparency and mitigation matters traditionally dominate the agendas. Transparency and mitigation show different patterns. While mitigation issues are more negotiations-intensive, and often about markets, the transparency discussions tend to be more implementation-focused. The database provides an empirical base for further research on various aspects of global climate governance.

Keywords: negotiations, agendas, climate change, UNFCCC

## **Key Policy Insights**

1. Intergovernmental agendas provide one way to study how countries collectively view climate change and potential governance options.
2. The Climate Negotiations Database finds stability in the top ten climate issues discussed over time. Mitigation and transparency are the top two categories.

3. The range of issues discussed in the context of international climate negotiations has expanded, especially since 2007. The focus has broadened beyond reducing emissions.
4. There is a mismatch between the recurrence of mitigation sub-items and outcomes that would reduce emissions. Half of the mitigation sub-items relate to market mechanisms and forests, perhaps indicating a lack of attention to reducing emissions from industrial sources.
5. The number of agenda sub-items for the climate regime spiked at the start of the Paris Agreement negotiations and remained relatively high. Under the Paris Agreement, the balance of issues considered may shift and potentially amplify the recent downturn in mitigation-related items.

## **Introduction**

Since the UN General Assembly agreed to launch negotiations on the issue in 1990, there have been recurrent rounds of discussions to make and remake global climate rules. Countries negotiated and adopted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement. Between the treaties, major decisions set new approaches to reducing emissions (such as the Copenhagen Accord and Cancun Agreements) and established new institutions (such as the Green Climate Fund).

During the rounds of negotiations, countries broadened the set of issues under consideration. Climate change was considered an environmental issue that required the reduction of emissions to prevent future impacts (Gupta, 2014). Today, the climate negotiation agendas include adaptation, technology transfer, and even implications of climate policy itself (response measures), the result of adding new issues to the formal negotiations over time. Social issues such as gender and Indigenous rights now regularly feature in the debates. Literature to date has explored mechanisms that facilitated the

introduction of some new issues, such as “climate bandwagoning” (Jinnah 2011) and social movement influence (Allan 2021). Others have focused on how specific issues have evolved, notably on finance (Zamarioli et al 2021), loss and damage (James et al 2014; Vanhala and Hestbaek 2016), and transparency (Gupta and Van Asselt 2019; Winkler, Mantlana and Letete 2017).

We currently lack a systematic understanding of the relative balance among issues or the volume of work undertaken by the UNFCCC to address each. To help fill this gap, we developed a novel database that catalogues and categorizes all the agendas of all the UNFCCC negotiation bodies, from 1995 to 2019. The database comprises 218 agendas, totalling 502 agenda sub-items. These sub-items often reoccur across agendas and years, for a total of 4783 entries. The database advances our understanding of what issues were negotiated, when they arrived on the intergovernmental agenda, and the relative workload associated with broad categories of topics under consideration.

Understanding what has been on the UNFCCC agendas can help inform two debates. First, negotiators often call for “balance” on the agenda, meaning the need to balance the issues dear to various states, for example, by treating mitigation and adaptation with similar importance and including finance, technology, and capacity building (cf IISD 2016; 2019). The Paris Agreement calls for a balance between support for mitigation and adaptation (Articles 9 and 10, on finance and technology), but its provisions may not be up to future adaptation needs (Sharma 2017). As we show, there is a historic dominance of transparency and mitigation issues.

Second, a historic look at the issues on the agendas can help address discussions over the nature of institutional change in the UNFCCC. For Falkner (2016), the Paris Agreement represents a new logic, and Held and Roger (2018) identify three different models of climate governance in the Kyoto Protocol, Copenhagen Accord, and Paris Agreement. Others suggest an incremental pattern of change, looking at a historic reliance on pledging dating back to the Kyoto Protocol (Depledge 2022), and the Agreement’s

reliance on existing mechanisms and path dependencies that shaped its design (Allan et al. 2021). Our findings suggest relative stability in the agendas and top climate issues. But, we note that the Paris Agreement's architecture, coupled with the lack of will, or need to negotiate new rules, could lead to a relative re-ordering of climate priorities as represented on the formal agendas.

We highlight two broad trends. First, regarding the volume and distribution of work among the negotiation bodies, we find a steadily increasing workload, represented by the number of agenda sub-items, that is not necessarily tied to the multiple rounds of negotiations that led to new agreements. We find a slow increase in agenda sub-items related to implementation. Second, regarding the issues discussed over time, we find that procedural issues stand out, followed by transparency and mitigation. Looking at which issues are repeatedly featured on agendas, it seems mitigation issues are more often under negotiation or marked by slow or stalled talks, while transparency agenda sub-items serve to further the implementation of reporting mechanisms. We also note the emergence or greater prominence of additional issues, such as adaptation and loss and damage, as the effects of climate change became more pronounced.

We conclude with a discussion of what these broad trends mean for studying climate governance and the future of UNFCCC negotiations. The Climate Negotiations Database provides a view of the breadth of negotiations. It can inform future work that could consider the political dynamics underpinning the uneven governance patterns we identify here.

### **What does an agenda represent?**

Intergovernmental agendas are the result of consultation, negotiation, and decisions. They are adopted at the beginning of each session based on the provisional agenda prepared by the Secretariat, in consultation with the COP Presidency. Parties may agree to change the provisional agenda to remove, add, or re-phrase agenda items. Issues are included on an agenda for two reasons. First, a previous

decision or treaty provision could mandate a body to address an issue. For example, the decision that adopted the Paris Agreement set out a list of issues to be resolved to operationalize the Agreement, which largely formed the agenda for the Ad hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA). Treaty provisions related to the financial mechanism or a constituted body may lead to an agenda item to report on activities and negotiate future work.

Second, parties can request that new issues be included on the agenda. Rules 9-11 of the draft rules of procedure<sup>1</sup> stipulate that all countries must agree to the addition. For example, in 2011, India requested intellectual property rights be included on the agenda. After extended negotiations, the adopted agenda did not include the issue because of a lack of agreement. In contrast, parties agreed to a proposal by Costa Rica and Papua New Guinea for an agenda item on reducing emissions from deforestation in 2005.

When considering the provisional agenda, countries may find that it does not sufficiently reflect their interests. For example, if the agenda is considered “unbalanced” by some, it will struggle to gain acceptance and countries will try to negotiate an acceptable version. For example, the APA agenda was initially seen as being too mitigation-centric by some developing countries, including the African Group, prompting debates until a new agenda was negotiated (IISD 2016). Such negotiations could lead to an agenda item that does not have a previously agreed mandate.

Intergovernmental agendas can provide insight into how countries collectively view the problem of climate change. Agendas can help us understand the priorities that enjoy collective support, or issues that remain on the agendas because of long-standing disagreement. Viewing these agendas over the UNFCCC’s history is a unique way to identify long-term trends in countries’ understanding of and action on climate change.

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<sup>1</sup> The rules of procedure have never been adopted. The draft rules of procedure are provisionally applied, except for the rule on voting because there is no consensus among parties for such a rule.

There are limits to the study of agendas. They do not tell us about the nature of the debate, for instance, if the issue prompted a protracted, procedural debate, a relatively smooth substantive discussion, or a report from an intergovernmental body with no comment. Agendas also tell us little about the negotiated outcomes. An item could be on the agenda for years because parties cannot reach an agreement on the next steps or because the issue has moved into a phase of routinely reviewing implementation. There may be a decision on an issue that wasn't officially on the agenda. Recent examples include gender and the issues related to the ocean. For both, there was no agenda item, but there was a COP decision on gender in 2012 and the ocean was included in the overarching covering decision in 2019. This decision arose through the COP Presidency. The Presidency has agenda-setting powers within the constraints of a party-driven process (Vogler 2016). It may raise and include issues for consideration and potential decision. However, if another party suggested an issue for inclusion in a cover decision, it could face opposition because it is not on the agenda. The formal agendas may exclude some issues that are discussed informally.

It is also difficult to fully discern the relative level of attention given to issues through studying agendas. In our database, one agenda sub-item for education and outreach is equivalent to one sub-item for loss and damage, although the latter receives more political attention and negotiating time in practice. Despite these limitations, the database can provide a window into the evolution and balance among issues over time and serve as a starting point for future work to address these limitations.

## **Methods**

To create the Climate Negotiations Database, we downloaded and coded all the agenda sub-items on all agendas of all the UNFCCC negotiation bodies, from 1995 to 2019 (Table 1 lists the bodies). Most of the agendas are publicly available. The UNFCCC Secretariat provided 14 agendas. We used the agendas as

adopted. Where only provisional agendas were available, we looked to the meeting reports to identify any items that were held in abeyance, removed, or changed from the provisional agenda.<sup>2</sup>

<b>Body</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Mandate</b>
Conference of the Parties (COP)	1995-present	The supreme decision-making body of the Convention that reviews the implementation and institutional administrative matters
Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP)	2005-present	Oversee implementation of the Kyoto Protocol
Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA)	2016-present	Oversee implementation of the Paris Agreement
Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA)	1995-present	Provide advice on scientific and technical matters related to the Convention, Protocol, and Agreement
Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI)	1995-present	Assess and review the implementation of the Convention, Protocol, and Agreement
Ad Hoc Group on Article 13 (AG13)	1995-1998	Explore options to help countries meet their UNFCCC commitments
Ad Hoc Group on the Berlin Mandate (AGBM)	1995-1997	Negotiated the Kyoto Protocol
Ad Hoc Working Group on Further Commitments for Annex I Parties under the Kyoto Protocol (AWG-KP)	2006-2012	Considered commitments of industrialized countries under the Kyoto Protocol after 2012
Ad Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action under the Convention (AWG-LCA)	2008-2012	Negotiated a strengthened international deal on climate change
Ad Hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action (ADP)	2011-2015	Negotiated the Paris Agreement, considered ways to enhance pre-2020 action
Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA)	2015-2018	Prepared for the entry into force of the Paris Agreement

**Table 1: Mandates of UNFCCC Bodies in the Climate Negotiations Database**

Our unit of analysis is a sub-item. For example, on the agenda for Subsidiary Body for Scientific and

Technological Advice (SBSTA) in 2000, agenda item 8 “Methodological Issues” had five sub-items: Land

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<sup>2</sup> Parties may agree to hold agenda items in abeyance. For example, the sub-item information contained in national communications of non-Annex I parties has been held in abeyance since 2007, but still appears on the provisional agenda for the Subsidiary Body for Implementation.



use, land-use change and forestry; Guidelines under Articles 5, 7 and 8 of the Kyoto Protocol; Good practice guidance and uncertainty management in national GHG inventories; Methods and tools to evaluate impacts and adaptation; and Other matters. We treat this as five distinct units of analysis. There are several instances, such as the example above, where an agenda item includes consideration of multiple categories of climate discussions.

Each sub-item was categorized based on its implied actions for countries. Some issues appeared to fall into multiple categories. This problem is particularly acute for cross-cutting items like finance; two such examples are the Adaptation Fund (finance and adaptation, 41 appearances in the dataset) and the provision of financial and technical support (finance and transparency, 40 appearances). Negotiators themselves sometimes debate which “room” to have such discussions. We coded these instances as finance, recognizing the potential under-counting of adaptation or transparency sub-items. We focused on the actions the sub-items could specify. In these cases, the sub-items involve discussions over institutional arrangements of a Fund and financial provision for reporting. Countries were not negotiating how to improve adaptation efforts or reporting; they debated how to support these efforts.

Some sub-items relate to reports from the constituted bodies, which are smaller bodies established to focus on the implementation of a work programme or to advance a mandate. We coded these sub-items according to the body’s substance. For example, the Report of the Adaptation Committee is coded as adaptation. The agenda sub-item may entail negotiations that set the future mandate or priority areas of work.

We count the number of sub-items and how often each sub-item appears on all agendas over time. Considering the “discrete” sub-items, that is the individual sub-items in each category, provides insight into the types of issues parties consider important in each category (see Annex I for a list of all sub-items in each category except procedural). Items re-occur for many reasons, from political stalemates to more

practical reasons. Sub-items re-appear if bodies met multiple times a year. Also, if a governing body (such as the COP) delegates further work to a subsidiary body, the sub-item would be on the agendas of both bodies. Looking at the overall re-occurrence of sub-items can indicate the volume of work on a given issue and on the focus of climate discussions over time.

When calculating how often a sub-item re-occurs on the agendas, we grouped similar sub-items (see Annex I). At times, this involved judgment on the part of the researchers to determine if sub-items were essentially the same item with slightly different wording. Others may make somewhat different decisions, but overall, our approach was consistent. In most cases, it was straightforward, such as grouping “good practices” on policies and measures with the previous sub-item on “best practices.” We counted sub-items as distinct if they specified a sector, decision, or actor, such as the various forest-related activities under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) or transparency items that sometimes specified a group of parties (e.g., national communications of Annex I parties versus the sub-item generally on national communications). We only counted an item as re-occurring if the text was identical, or similar enough that the mandate, discussions, and actions for parties seemed substantively the same.

The coding categories (see Table 2) were determined iteratively. We began with a list of common categories of action captured in the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol, and Paris Agreement: mitigation, transparency, finance, technology, capacity building, adaptation, education, and compliance. We added response measures, which is mentioned in each treaty although not given its own article, loss and damage, and social issues. As coding continued, additional themes became apparent. We added categories for goal setting and review, country and group-specific issues, and the science-policy interface. The “other” category includes items that spanned multiple categories or had an ambiguous mandate. For example, agriculture negotiations are hampered by divergent framings that view agriculture as an adaptation or a mitigation issue (Chandra et al 2016). We included additional tags for

forests and markets. Forests is the only sector included in all three UNFCCC treaties. Aviation and marine bunker fuels are the only other sector specified, and only in the Kyoto Protocol. Markets are an important, but contentious, area of mitigation negotiations.

A codebook defined each category and gave examples. There were three coders: the two project leads and a research assistant. One project lead checked all coding to ensure consistency.

**Table 2: Coding Categories**

Category	Description	Examples
Procedural	the UNFCCC process, bureaucratic requirements, meeting formalities	Election of officers; Decision making in the UNFCCC process
Mitigation	reducing emissions, or rules to ensure complementarity and consistency of parties' efforts	Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation; Common time frames; Matters related to the Clean Development Mechanism
Adaptation	countries' adaptation planning	National Adaptation Plans
Loss and Damage	loss and damage as a separate item from adaptation	Report of the Warsaw International Mechanism Executive Committee
Transparency	national reporting processes, forms, guidelines	Guidance related to national communications
Finance	provision of finance to developing countries; operation of or guidance to climate funding bodies	Guidance to the Green Climate Fund; Adaptation Fund
Technology	Processes to support the transfer & development of technologies in developing countries	Poznan strategic programme on technology transfer
Capacity building	Processes to support and enhance human, institutional and governance capacity	Report of the Paris Committee on Capacity Building
Social issue	Human-centred issues usually considered social policy	Gender; Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples' platform
Response measures	The effects of climate policy, particularly on developing countries reliant on fossil fuels	Durban Forum on Response Measures
Education and outreach	Practices and processes for improving outreach on climate change	UNFCCC Article 6; Action for Climate Empowerment
Compliance	Processes for holding countries to account for meeting their obligations under the treaties	Multilateral Consultative Process
Science-policy	Processes for improving the input of	Fifth Report of the

interface	science into policy discussions	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Research and Systematic Observation
Goal setting and review	Collective target setting, reviewing progress or adequacy of targets	2013-2015 Review
Country or group-specific	Relates to the special circumstances of a specific country or a group	Matters related to Least Developed Countries
Other	Reflects multiple issue areas equally or are ambiguous	Agriculture, Matters relating to paragraphs 2-6 of the Durban Platform for Enhanced Action

## Results

### Climate Agendas since 1995

The Climate Negotiations Database provides insight into the emergence and longevity of issues in the UNFCCC negotiations. Here, we outline the volume of work undertaken by the UN climate change regime, using the number of agenda sub-items as a proxy. We then turn to the dominance of some categories and the emergence of new issues on the agendas that broadened the understanding of what constitutes climate governance.

#### *Volume and Distribution of Work*

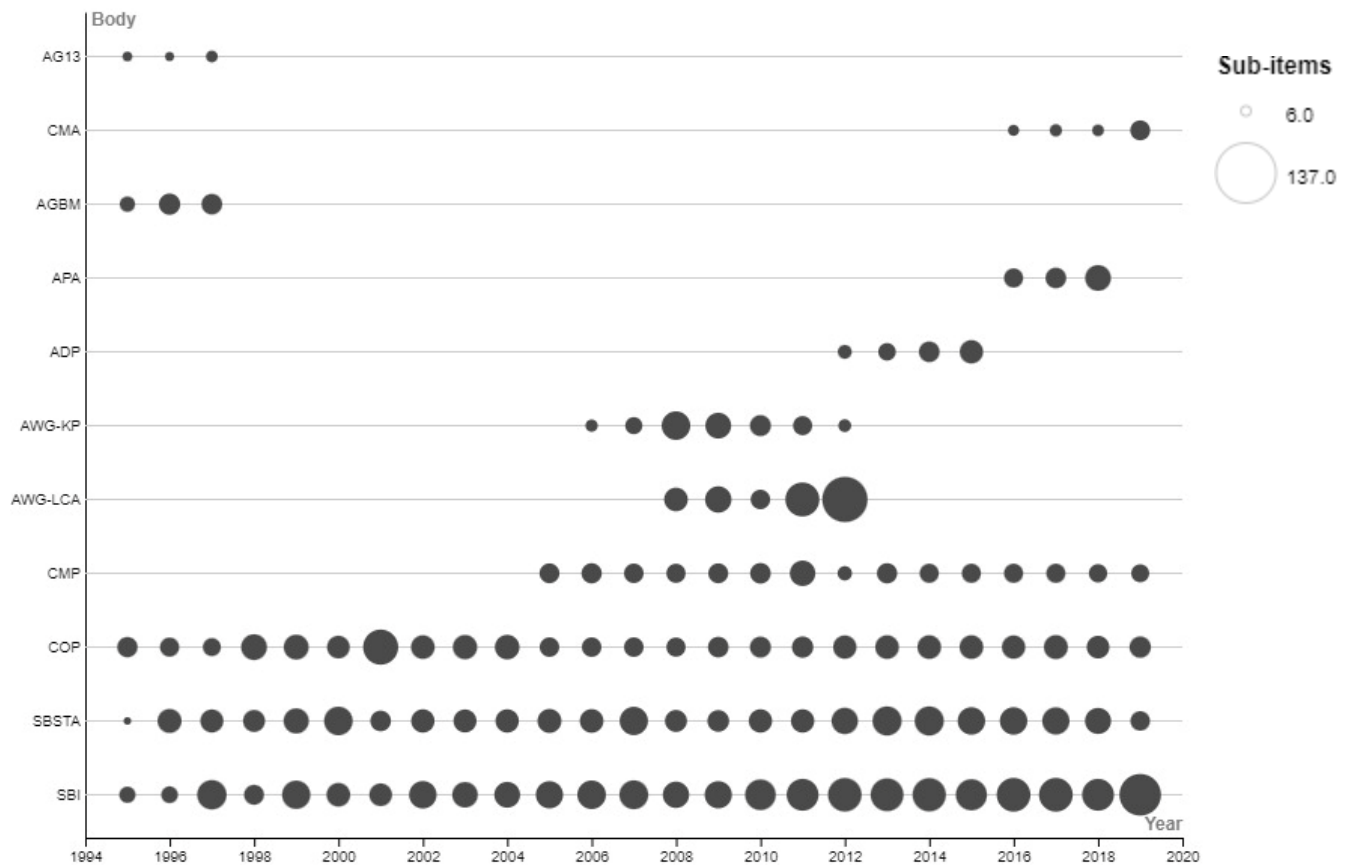
The agendas indicate particularly busy periods for the global regime. The number of sub-items is an indication, and only a partial one, of the workload negotiators face.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 shows the number of sub-items for each body every year. A higher volume of work could be driven by larger agendas or additional meetings. All signal that parties agreed to work on additional issues, or that they needed more time to negotiate; in other words, that more work is required to meet the deadlines and goals of the regime.

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<sup>3</sup> There may be other, more attuned indicators of workload, such as the number of documents produced, the number and nature of outcomes, or the number of contact groups convened on each issue (or hours that they meet), the number of pages in the Earth Negotiations Bulletin summary, or negotiators' perceptions, among others.

The volume of work, as measured by the number of sub-items, has increased over time, with a particularly busy burst in 2011 and 2012. During this time, the UNFCCC had to decide how to approach the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, how to finalize outstanding work from the Cancun agreements, and, in 2012, start negotiations for what would become the Paris Agreement. This indicates perhaps that cleaning up from the failure to adopt a new agreement in Copenhagen involves as much work as negotiating new agreements. The AWG-LCA was established to negotiate an “agreed outcome” by 2009 but, as seen in the database, it was busier after the Copenhagen meeting until its dissolution in 2012. Afterward, we traced in the database that the subsidiary bodies (SBSTA and Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI)) experienced an increased workload because some issues from the AWG-LCA were transferred to their agendas for further work.

**Figure 1: Volume of work for each body over time**



Data source: Climate Negotiations Database, compiled by the authors.

Figure 1 also shows the relative workload of various bodies in terms of agenda sub-items. Each has its own mandate (see Table 1). Over time, the SBI has seen a slow increase in its agenda size, perhaps indicating that the UNFCCC is moving toward discussions related to implementation. All the ad hoc groups added a temporary strain to the workload. Some of the ad hoc bodies were established for specific reasons, such as compliance (AG13) or operationalizing the Paris Agreement (APA). Three were established to negotiate new legal instruments: the AGBM, AWG-LCA, and the ADP. During the negotiation phase, each of these bodies kept their agendas relatively short, with agenda items phrased broadly to avoid pre-judging outcomes and to ward off negotiations over the agenda itself, even though the number of issues under discussion was, in reality, significant. The ad hoc bodies held additional meetings as parties worked to meet deadlines under the burden of a high workload, increasing the

number of agenda sub-items considered that year. When possible, the sessions of ad hoc bodies would suspend rather than adjourn, and agendas are labelled by the meeting and session (e.g. ADP2-9, 2-10, etc). According to the draft rules of procedure, suspending a session means that the agenda remains the same when it resumes while adjourning a session requires that parties adopt the next session's agenda, which could open it to re-negotiation. These practices kept these agendas roughly similar over time, despite the proliferation of issues evident on climate agendas over time.

### *Climate Issues Over Time*

Identifying the broad trends in agendas can help understand the priorities of the climate regime. Table 3 shows the cumulative number of sub-items for each category, how often they appear in the database, and when those issues first appeared on an agenda (the Appendix indicates when parties ended their consideration of specific sub-items). The total number of appearances can partially indicate the volume of work on a given category over time. The number of sub-items show how many issues parties discussed in each category. Explanations and examples of the categories are in Table 2. It needs to be emphasized that Table 3 captures when the item was first included on a formal agenda. There may have been mentions before its inclusion, through parties' or stakeholders' submissions of their views, or in the text of an earlier decision. Here, we highlight the expansion of issues on the agendas and the relative workload of each category over time.

**Table 3: Number of sub-items, total appearances, and initiation of work by categories**

Category	Total Appearances	No. of Sub-items	Year First Appears
Procedural	2359	---	1995
Transparency	538	148	1995
Mitigation	534	96	1995
Finance	266	66	1995
Response measures	224	28	1997

Technology	161	35	1995
Capacity building	124	13	1999
Adaptation	116	22	1999
Country or group-specific	95	18	1999
Other	101	21	1995
Science-policy interface	70	18	1995
Compliance	65	17	1995
Goal setting and review	49	10	2000
Education and outreach	32	5	1998
Loss and damage	28	5	2011
Social issues	21	2	2013

New issues have emerged on the agendas, as climate impacts mount. Adaptation discussions began in 1999 with technical discussions on “coastal adaptation strategies.” The Adaptation Fund was established in 2001 and programmes of work were established to support adaptation planning. Loss and damage emerged on the agendas in 2011 to recognize that some slow and rapid climate impacts are beyond adaptation planning. Programmes of work on gender and Indigenous Peoples and local communities recognize that these stakeholders are disproportionately affected by climate change and bring novel solutions. Together, these recently emerged issues indicate a degree of reflexivity among countries to launch work on issues of concern. It also indicates the governance issues that arise from the ongoing failure to reduce emissions and civil society’s consistent engagement.

These newer issues compete for space on the agenda with issues historically considered core to climate governance. The newer issues appear less often, as have some historic issues. Education and outreach was first included on an agenda in 1998 and its five agenda sub-items appear 32 times over time. Similarly, the science-policy interface is important to ensure policymakers and negotiators understand the latest science and appears 70 times since the first UNFCCC meeting in 1995.

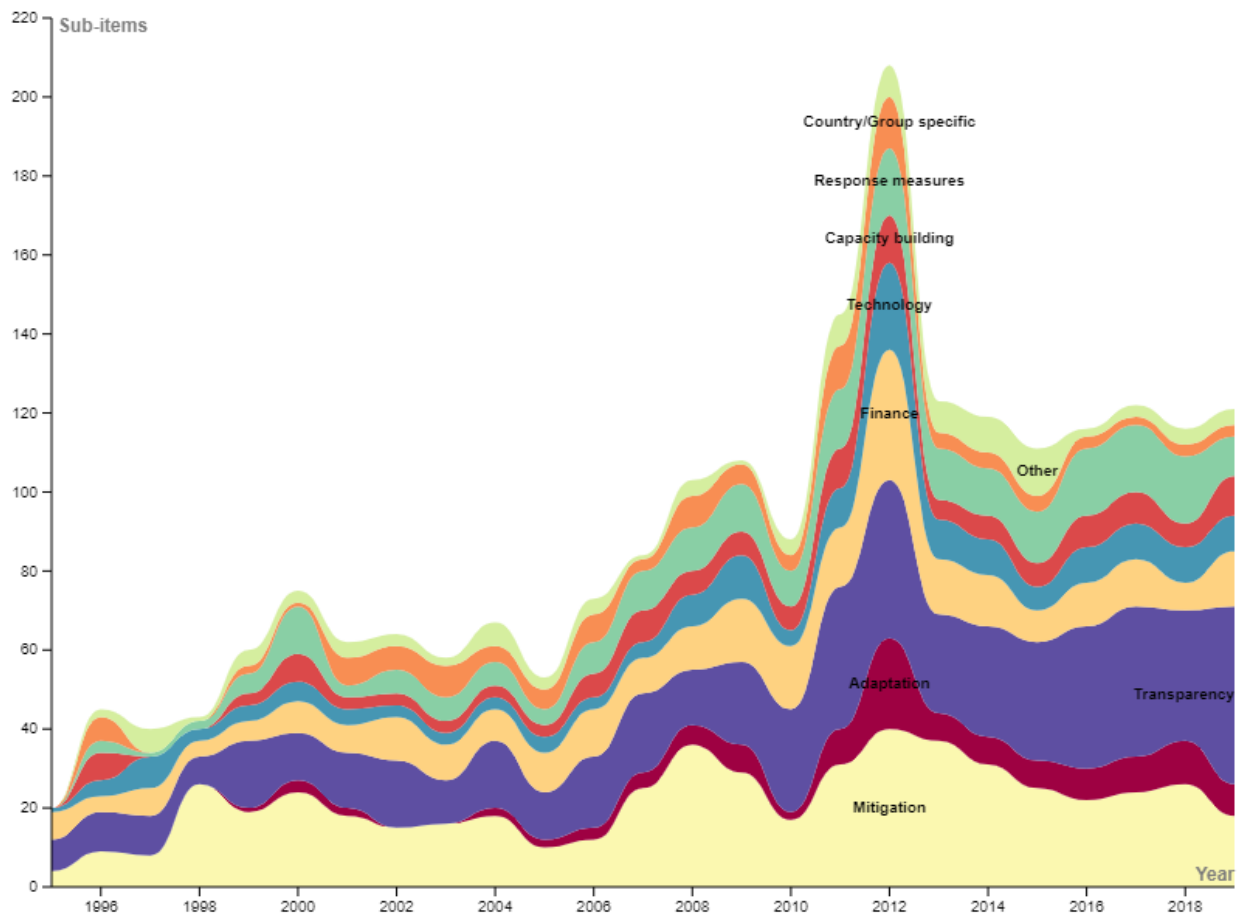


There are ten dominant issue areas, with the most agenda sub-items that appear the most often in the database (Table 3): procedural issues; transparency; mitigation; finance; response measures; technology; capacity building; adaptation; other; and country- or group-specific. Procedural issues are a central function of international institutions. It is therefore not surprising that procedural issues dominate the agendas. We did not calculate how many procedural sub-items there are, in part because they are quite similar and do not affect the substantive content of the regime.

Many of the remaining nine substantive issues shown in Figure 2 generated more work after 2007, indicating the long effect of some decisions. The 2007 Bali Roadmap opened the negotiations to a wider range of issues. It helped cement the “adaptation turn” in climate governance (Schipper 2006) and gave greater attention to means of implementation issues (finance, technology, and capacity building). After the failure in Copenhagen to adopt a new agreement, the Cancun agreements institutionalized many of these issues, prompting subsequent agenda items. In the lead-up to the Paris conference, the range of issues remained largely similar.

Figure 2 illustrates the variation among these top nine issues. Transparency and mitigation have long dominated the discussions, for political and technical reasons. Politically, the expansion of obligatory mitigation actions and enhanced reporting by developing countries was long debated. As the historic recurrence of these issues perhaps shows, parties view these issues as core to global climate governance.

## **2: Nine top substantive categories of issues over time**



Source: Climate Negotiations Database, compiled by the authors

Notably, there is a recent decline in the number of mitigation sub-items. From 2012 to 2014, mitigation appeared 40, 27, and 31 times. In 2019, there were only 18 mitigation-related items that appeared on the agendas. This contrasts with the recent increase in the number of times transparency features on the agendas (40, 25, 28 2012-2014 versus 45 in 2019).

Transparency and mitigation negotiations appear to have evolved differently. Mitigation items tend to involve protracted negotiations as well as implementation, while transparency issues focus more on implementation. The recurrence rate, or the percentage of agenda items that appear more than once, for mitigation is 74% and for transparency is 43.9%. More mitigation sub-items persist on agendas than

transparency sub-items. The three most recurring sub-items for mitigation are emissions from aviation and maritime transport (38 appearances), activities implemented jointly under the pilot phase<sup>4</sup> (29) and reducing emissions from deforestation (and degradation) in developing countries<sup>5</sup> (25). Discussions related to emissions from aviation and maritime transport have been marked by very little substantive debate, and an overall lack of political will in the UNFCCC (Martinez Romera 2016). This case exemplifies the need for further, qualitative research because the number of sub-items can, in some cases, reflect stalled or even absent substantive discussions rather than progressive rule-making or implementation.

Among mitigation sub-items, fewer seem to relate directly to reducing emissions, especially from industrial sources. Over one-third (36.6%) of the re-occurring mitigation sub-items relate to markets; 14% relate to forests. The CDM features prominently, from the review of its modalities and procedures (17 appearances each) to technical issues such as HCFC-22 or carbon capture and storage (15 and 13 appearances, respectively). CDM negotiations, as seen in the database, are a mix of implementation reviews, and negotiations over methodologically difficult issues. The negotiations for a new market mechanism that began after the Durban COP in 2011 have appeared on agendas either as part of the framework for various approaches or under Paris Agreement Article 6, concluding in 2022.

Transparency negotiations feature many items that appear once because they relate to the implementation of subsequent rounds of national communications, biennial update reports, and other reporting cycles under the Convention, Kyoto Protocol, and Cancun agreements. The five most common transparency sub-items are the work of the Consultative Group of Experts (34), Annex I national communications (30), annual report on the technical review of GHG inventories of Annex I parties (24), and non-Annex I national communications (22).

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<sup>4</sup> This agenda item began at COP1 for parties to implement activities to reduce emissions or create or enhance sinks in other countries, beyond what would have occurred otherwise. No market credits were involved with these pilot projects. Consideration of this agenda sub-item ended in 2001

<sup>5</sup> We grouped the agenda sub-items for reducing emissions from deforestation with later sub-items that reflected the addition of forest degradation.

## Discussion

The Climate Negotiations Database offers one way to study the breadth of work and issues addressed by the UNFCCC. It can help inform debates related to the balance of issues addressed and the “newness” of the Paris Agreement. Regarding balance, our analysis of the volume of work and the proliferation of issues lends some support to the argument put forward by some developing country negotiators.

Recently, the African Group and China argued that adaptation remains overlooked in comparison to mitigation and reporting requirements (IISD 2019). Our findings show that transparency and mitigation traditionally dominate the agendas, in terms of the number of sub-items and their re-appearance, with relatively fewer sub-items on finance and adaptation.

However, our analysis complicates this argument. Half of the sub-items on mitigation relate to technical and political discussions regarding markets and forests. The most recurrent sub-item, bunker fuels, has not featured substantive discussion since 2005.<sup>6</sup> Discussions related to sectoral emissions convened in 2008 and 2009, with no substantive outcome. The Glasgow Climate Pact was in part notable for its call to phase down inefficient fossil fuel subsidies and unabated coal. There has been a consistent need for major emitters to agree to common approaches for reducing emissions to meet the goals of the regime. To reach the goals of the regime requires a strong focus on mitigation efforts to rapidly decarbonize societies and development trajectories. Yet this urgent need may not be strictly matched by the mitigation sub-items routinely discussed over time.

We found a recent downturn in mitigation-related discussions. The decline may be, in part, due to the nature of the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement and its rulebook have a limited role in determining the mitigation aspects of nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Mitigation is now construed as

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<sup>6</sup> On the UNFCCC website, the last substantive document was published in 2005:  
<https://unfccc.int/topics/mitigation/workstreams/emissions-from-international-transport-bunker-fuels#eq-2>

largely a national-level issue, with no global negotiations taking place on the content of the NDCs. The Ad Hoc Working Group on the Paris Agreement (APA) finished the operational guidelines for NDCs, and market mechanisms and common time frames sub-items were resolved at COP26. This leaves only a few mitigation items, such as aviation and maritime transport and periodic reviews of the NDC guidance.

The gap between the urgency of scaling up mitigation efforts and the lack of a consistent focus on mitigation in the formal negotiations became apparent in Glasgow. In the cover decision on matters related to the Paris Agreement, parties decided to hold an annual high-level ministerial roundtable on pre-2030 ambition and called upon parties to “revisit and strengthen” their 2030 targets by the end of 2022. This re-inserted mitigation into the annual negotiations.

It seems that the Paris Agreement system presents new questions for the regime. Our findings are more ambivalent on whether the Agreement represents a new system of governance for the regime. While we find an expansion of the issues under consideration, this occurred before the Paris Agreement. There is a consistent top ten issues that are historic and relate to previous agreements and mandates. Most of the remaining bodies, the COP, CMP, CMA, SBI, and SBSTA, have been relatively stable in terms of their agendas. We do not find major changes in the volume or type of work after each of the treaties or the Cancun agreements, as one might expect if these represented distinct modes of governance. However, we find a recent shift in balance. The recurrence of mitigation sub-items, as noted, has decreased.

Finance and loss and damage saw small increases, which may signal the importance of these issues and continued future pressure to mobilize funds for those disproportionately affected by major economies’ historic and current emissions. The Paris Agreement calls for a new collective quantified finance goal to be agreed upon by 2025 and those negotiations began in Glasgow. The recognition of loss and damage in a separate article of the Paris Agreement was an important win for climate-vulnerable countries that may provide an institutional foothold for future discussions.

The data presented here provide a broad, historical perspective on the form and nature of climate governance that the UNFCCC can supply. The high frequency of procedural, transparency and mitigation sub-items noted here illustrate the core features of the UN-led process. The UNFCCC has focused on providing an organizing framework for country commitments and encouraging the flow of information rather than shaping the content of party commitments.

## **Conclusion**

The Climate Negotiations Database can help identify patterns of issue emergence, evolution, recurrence, and resolution on the agendas. There are limits to this approach, including its ability to identify the relative political attention of issues and the reasons why they emerge and persist on agendas. Some issues are on the agendas because they are never resolved, while others move rather quickly from concept to negotiations and implementation. Each appears similarly in the database and requires additional work to investigate the causes for their persistence. This database lays the groundwork for future work by providing a detailed breakdown of agendas over time. It also affords the possibility of tracking why issues emerged and gained traction, and to what impact on parties' participation and subsequent actions. There is a trade-off between a manageable volume of work that enables wide, effective participation, but also addresses key issues for climate action. This database may help inform qualitative work that explores the political dynamics that shape this trade-off and identify how it may be resolved.

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