

Science for Environment Policy

Including civil society organisations in climate policy-making improves popular support

Including civil society organisations (CSOs) when negotiating climate policy can mobilise public support for international agreements, a new study suggests. Using online surveys researchers found that the popular legitimacy of global climate governance decreases when CSOs are excluded.

CSOs are defined as voluntary organisations that are separate from state institutions, are not directly profit-oriented and do not seek political office¹. This includes a wide variety such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientific institutions and [business](#) associations, amongst many others. Greater CSO participation in global policy agenda governance (institutions) is widely believed to increase transparency, strengthen representation of otherwise marginalised groups, and improve a delegation's capacity to solve highly complex challenges through increased knowledge and expertise.

Sceptics, however, argue that CSOs are not accountable to citizens and often represent narrow, focused interests. Reflecting this debate, different countries have taken different stances on whether to include CSOs in international policy-making. For example, at recent meetings under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change², around 70% of all national delegations included at least one CSO representative. Denmark, Germany and the US, however, did not include any.

In this study researchers used data from three online surveys, with a total of 3,269 respondents from a wide range of nationalities. The first survey explored general preferences for CSO participation in [global climate policy](#), the second whether CSO involvement increases popular legitimacy of the negotiations, and which aspects (of legitimacy) specifically, and the third examined how change in the current state of CSO participation affects popular legitimacy. Participants read an introductory scenario featuring an upcoming international conference due to make important decisions on global climate policy. They were then asked to express their preference for various different compositions of national delegations with and without CSOs, and rate each delegation's level of transparency, representation, skill and expertise.

Overall, the results suggested that individuals view CSO involvement in global climate policy-making favourably. In the first experiment, participants chose an average of 2.54 CSO representatives in their five-person delegation, preferring NGOs and scientific institutions to business representatives. The second and third experiments demonstrate that the popular legitimacy of global climate governance decreases when CSOs are excluded.

In view of the current stalemate in global climate negotiations, calls to make the process more efficient by excluding CSOs to simplify procedures are becoming stronger. The results of this study, however, suggest that governments interested in increasing public support for ambitious climate policies could benefit from more CSO involvement.

Popular legitimacy is likely to play a more important role in climate policy than in other international policy areas such as world trade or monetary policy, where elite consensus and state consent may still be the most important sources of legitimacy. Further research could examine the broader question of how various forms of CSO involvement could affect popular legitimacy of international governance in a wider range of policy areas.



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1. <http://www.un.org/en/civilsociety/>

2. <http://unfccc.int/2860.php>