



Decoding UNFCCC Language

Who is Who of COP

UNFCCC: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (established 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit). The goal: stabilise greenhouse gas emissions at a sustainable level, preventing interference with the climate system. UN conventions are binding agreements, and this one involves most countries: the 198 member states meet yearly at COPs to review and update goals.

Structure of the UNFCCC

The secretariat: Based in Bonn. Organises and supports negotiation sessions, including the COPs. They also maintain the registry of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and communicate with stakeholders.

GOVERNING BODIES

COP: Conference of the Parties. This is the annual meeting of the member states of the UNFCCC, and is the main decision making body. Ongoing negotiations are discussed, key agreements are reviewed and discussed. This year, at COP30, there will be a programme of thematic days: side events encouraging practical action around agenda items.

CMA: Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement.

CMP: Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol.

SUBSIDIARY BODIES

SBSTA: Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice. Provides governing bodies at COPs with scientific and technological advice.

SBI: Subsidiary Body for Implementation. Provides governing bodies at COPs with advice on implementation of agreements.

Where Negotiations Happen — and How Decisions Are Made

There are several negotiation tracks, some new and others ongoing. These are discussed within subsidiary bodies, as well as within ad hoc working groups created for specific mandates. Within these bodies, smaller **contact groups** may be formed to focus on particular agenda items or sections of draft text. These are still formal, but allow for more detailed exchanges among Parties. **Informals** are less formal consultations where negotiators work to narrow differences and refine language, while **informal informals** are even smaller, off-the-record sessions that tackle the most sensitive issues. **Huddles** are the most ad hoc and spontaneous, often forming in the corridors or during plenaries to resolve last-minute disagreements before decisions are adopted.

Negotiation outcomes move upward through this structure. Once consensus is reached, the text is brought to the **plenaries**, where it is formally adopted by the relevant governing body. Once adopted, implementation begins. Progress and compliance are tracked through mechanisms such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and the Global Stocktake (GST), with subsidiary bodies like the SBI reviewing technical and procedural details.

Core Acronyms You Need to Know

Acronym	Full Term	Description
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change	International environmental treaty, est. 1992, to address climate change by stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations.

COP	Conference of the Parties	UNFCCCs supreme decision-making body, where countries review progress & make climate-related decisions.
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	UN body that assesses science related to climate change, provides policymakers with regular scientific reports.
Article 6	Article 6 of the Paris Agreement (COP21)	Provides rules for international cooperation on carbon markets and non-market approaches to achieve climate goals.
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions (Paris Agreement)	Climate action plans submitted by countries outlining efforts to reduce national emissions & adapt to climate impacts.
GST	Global Stocktake	Periodic assessment under the Paris Agreement, evaluating collective progress toward its goals.
Article 2.1c	Article 2.1c of the Paris Agreement (COP21)	Calls for financial flows to be consistent with pathways toward low greenhouse gas emissions & climate-resilient development.
CBDR-RC	Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities	A principle recognizing that all countries are responsible for addressing climate change, but their levels of responsibility and capability differ.
L&D	Loss & Damage	Refers to negative impacts of climate change that can't be avoided by mitigation or adaptation. Often affects vulnerable countries.
MEA	Multilateral Environmental Agreement	Legally binding agreement between countries, addresses global environmental issues, e.g. biodiversity, pollution & climate change.
REDD & REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (Plus)	Framework to financially reward developing countries for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. REDD+ includes conservation, sustainable forest management, and enhancement of forest carbon stocks.
TFFF	Tropical Forests Forever Fund	Proposed fund for tropical forests, using public funding to incentivise private investment. Proposed \$125bn, 20% for Indigenous peoples and local communities.

What Language Really Means

Legal UNFCCC Language			
Word	Meaning	Legally Binding?	Notes
Shall	Means that an action is obligatory or binding. Enforceable under international law.	YES	When used in conjunction with a weaker word (i.e. ' <i>shall</i> endeavor' it can make the phrase not legally binding)
Should	Non-legally binding, used to encourage an action.	NO	Weaker than <i>shall</i> .
Must	Means that the following action is required and almost always binding	YES	Not commonly used to mandate specific actions, rather to strengthen overall goals (i.e. 'measures <i>must</i> be taken').

Urges, Encourages, Invites	Used in non-binding decisions to encourage action without legal obligation.	NO	
Requires	Indicates a mandatory obligation.	YES	Binding when used in treaty text; conditionally binding in COP decisions
Decides	Used when making firm decisions, often regarding future actions or policies.	YES	Means that parties have collectively agreed to take an action, binding parties (at least politically).
Establishes	Creates a new body or process.	YES	Used to create commitments, bodies, mechanisms etc.
Commit to	Promise or pledge to do something	NO	Shows intention without being legally binding.
Operationalizes	Puts a decision into action.	PARTLY	Binding for the parties involved.

Red Flag Words and Phrases

These phrases significantly weaken an agreement and often indicate that no action will be taken.

Voluntary	Means that a country/party can choose whether to act or not. There is no legal obligation.
As appropriate	Means that a party should act only if it makes sense for its situation. This gives flexibility and weakens an obligation.
Subject to available funds	Means that a party should only act if they have enough money to take action, often translating to no action being taken.

Brackets: Brackets indicate that language is still disputed and under negotiation. When a consensus is reached, the brackets are removed.

Example: Developed country Parties [shall/should] provide financial support to developing countries for climate adaptation.

The brackets mean that there are still disputes over whether the clause should include 'shall' or 'should', i.e. if the clause will be legally binding.

Legally Binding: This signifies that the instrument in question is obligatory under international law and therefore subject to state responsibility.

How to Track Negotiations

How tracking works

1. Monitor the Plenary session for the confirmation of the agenda and thematic sessions
2. Monitor the official [UNFCCC platform/app](#) to track negotiations, side events and updated sessions each day.
3. Attend open meetings: unless specifically asked to do so, observers cannot intervene or negotiate. Audio recordings are NOT permitted without authorization from the UNFCCC secretariat so take notes.
4. Track draft texts through UNFCCC secretariat publications and informal groups. The color-coding is often used to indicate the status of different negotiation topics.

Green: The text has been agreed upon.

Yellow/Orange: Draft text is available but still under negotiation.

Red: No draft text has been published for that topic yet.

Note: In early stages of negotiations, documents may only be restricted to party delegates.

Where to find relevant information and documents:

1. [COP30 Website](#): The official website for the UNFCCC COP30, Brazil Amazônia – Belém 2025 and the primary reference for all key updates of COP agenda, thematic sessions and participation.
2. [UNFCCC Website](#): The official UNFCCC website for negotiation documents and draft texts.

3. [IISD Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#): Independent source that summarises daily developments in negotiations at COP.
4. [CarbonBrief](#): An online publication site that provides summaries, outcomes and data-driven in depth analysis of negotiations.
5. [ClimaTalk](#): Youth-led international non-profit organisation that makes global climate policy accessible to young people. It demystifies COP processes, language, and policies through factsheets, debriefs, and articles.
6. [Care About Climate](#): An international organisation dedicated to breaking barriers and building pathways for young people to develop skills for confidently engaging and making an impact in climate policy spaces.
7. [YOUNGO](#): Official Children and Youth Constituency of the UNFCCC that covers updates and analyses negotiations on all major thematic areas of COP processes.
8. [Climate Home News](#): An independent digital publication offering investigative commentaries on COP processes, negotiations and outcomes.
9. [Climate Action Network \(CAN\)](#): An NGO that serves as a resource for young people by offering negotiation updates, analytical briefs and capacity-building opportunities to engage in global climate advocacy and policy processes.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can youth actively participate in negotiations?

Participation is open only to party delegation or when specifically invited to speak during open negotiations by the chair. The [Code of Conduct](#) guides on how to participate in meetings and events.

2. How then can I make my voice heard during COP discussions?

Leverage participation in side events, workshops, advocacy and youth engagements through NGOs and other youth organisations like YOUNGO and Climate Action Network (CAN) that deliver written submissions on various negotiation topics.

3. What is the Green vs Blue Zone?

The Green Zone is a public area for Civil Society Organisations, observer organisations or any non-accredited participants, while the Blue Zone is a UN-managed official negotiation area for accredited delegates. Entry into the blue zone is strictly by badge.

4. How do I get to the green zone? Do I need a green zone badge to enter if I only have a blue one?

While entry to the green zone is sometimes by registration directly to the host country, it will be open to the public for [COP30](#) with no accreditation/registration required.

5. Where do I find the schedule of negotiations, side events, and pavilions? Where can I find the daily program or updates?

Check the [UNFCCC event platform/mobile app](#) and log in with the username (email) based on the approved access during registration. The platform shows detailed meetings schedules, venues, time and accessibility. Ensure to check them everyday for any updates or changes.

6. How do I navigate the venue and find meeting rooms?

The official [UNFCCC platform/app](#) lists all sessions with their assigned meeting rooms. Large signage, information desks and volunteers are placed at key points to support participants in navigating venues.

7. How do I know which sessions I'm allowed to attend?

Always refer to the [UNFCCC event platform/mobile app](#) for the most up-to-date meeting schedules. Each session specifies access status as follows:

- Open to Parties and Observers
- Closed Meeting
- Media access permitted

8. Are there any social media/publishing rules, and can I take photos or post on social media?

As a general rule, recordings and photos are allowed in public areas, open meetings and side events with consideration of individual privacy, and prohibited in closed meetings, contact groups, informal negotiations unless allowed as an accredited media. Check the [UNFCCC Use of Cameras](#) and [Code of Conduct](#).