

# Towards a New Climate Alliance: The Cartagena Dialogue

## Part 2

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This case was written in recognition and honor of Pete Betts († 2023), a legend in UNFCCC diplomacy. Pete was a civil servant who in his own words took professional pride in being boring, an advocate for an ambitious climate regime, an ally for the voices of the most vulnerable, a person who behind the scenes has shaped climate governance for the better. According to all interview participants Pete was key to the creation of the Cartagena Dialogue. As one interview participant put it: “If you were to take one person away and Cartagena would have surely failed, it would have been Pete Betts.”

## Planning the First Meeting

### Who to Invite?

The natural starting point for considering who to invite was the group that had met in Copenhagen including, but not limited to, the Marshall Islands, Costa Rica, Mexico, Sweden, and Chile. An overriding consideration in the choice of who to invite was the personalities of individual negotiators. Andrea, Pete, and Robert wanted to bring together delegates with different regions and groupings, to discuss openly with each other, and to learn from each other. Such openness required trust; thus, trusted contacts are who the group considered first.<sup>i</sup> “Luckily there was no one we had to leave out from Copenhagen. Who we invited was always driven by people we can work with.”<sup>ii</sup>

This approach, of prioritizing people they knew and trusted, and who had ambitious but “rational” positions, would stay a key theme going forward. Andrea recalls a lot of the conversations over the years along the lines of “oh, that person seems to make very pragmatic points and doesn’t get held up in the process. Let’s consider inviting them. (...) All of the people that [were invited] to the meetings were people that we could trust and have a real conversation with.”<sup>iii</sup> Members of the Cartagena Dialogue’s central circle do not report of very deliberate strategic recruitment efforts to get countries on board, but rather characterize the way they approached growing the circle as more organic, ad-hoc, based on the personalities of individuals and whether those individuals and their country’s positions would fit in.<sup>iv</sup> As a result, the group that started to form was bound to be small in nature, but they didn’t care that it was small: “We cared about coming up with good ideas. That’s what gave us the freedom to select who we wanted.”<sup>v</sup>

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This case was written under the Climate Case and Simulation Series by the Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory at Harvard Kennedy School’s Center for Public Leadership. The authors want to thank Gabrielle Bacon for supporting the creation of the case. In addition, we would like to thank Andrea Guerrero Garcia, Kaveh Guilanpour, and the many other interviewees who supported this case but wished to remain anonymous, all the members of the Advisory Committee for our climate work, as well as Linor Zeilig who provided insightful comments.

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This approach, however, found its natural limits as it became clear that the group had no representation from African negotiators and a disproportionate number of European countries that wanted to join. Putting together a group that embodied the ideal of trusted conversations across divides in the spirit of a multilateral approach would need to balance inviting individuals from their networks with some form of regional representation that ensures diverse perspectives are present. They went through the list of negotiators for African countries to consider individuals. Ultimately, about 20 ministers from various African countries were invited to the inaugural meeting.

Simultaneously, the group had to decide how to deal with very powerful countries that had diverging policy priorities. The group agreed that countries with political positions that were inherently opposed to the ideals of the group would not be invited. For some countries this choice was clear: the biggest emitter countries who they perceived to be blocking critical issues, in particular the US, China, and India, would not be invited. For countries with positions that were not as clear cut and required further consideration, their deliberation process continued to proceed ad-hoc based on the countries' positions and the qualities of the individual negotiators they would be working with.

Another problem concerned the membership of European countries: The team wanted to maintain balance and actively prevented an overrepresentation of European countries, many of which they expected would be lobbying to join. European countries were larger, sent more delegates to everything, and did most of the talking. Beyond considerations of appropriate representation, such a disbalance would have been counterproductive for discussions that should allow learning between developed and developing countries based on their diverse contexts. Many European countries who were interested in joining were not—and would never be—invited. The EU was represented as a whole, and beyond this, France, Germany, and the UK took a key role. Despite the desire to control membership tightly, in Copenhagen, “somehow Sweden got in and never left,”<sup>vi</sup> which Andrea attributes to the Swedish technical negotiator being “excellent.”<sup>vii</sup> But other than this, EU country membership remained limited.

Once the leadership team had established a list, they started to reach out to the negotiators. The group would contact the individuals they knew well to inform them of the format, to tell them what they planned and to prepare them for the fact that an invite for their ministers would be coming. Several countries expressed a hesitation to join, due to fear of G77 traditions. Moreover, it became very apparent that most countries (in particular, developing ones) would only join if there were no written or public records of them being present. There could be no public participant list, they insisted. Thus, to date, no participant list of the first convening exists.

It was crucially important for Andrea and others to move such procedural hurdles out of the way before the actual ministerial meeting. They wanted for the ministers to discuss the substance (albeit at a political level) and not get bogged down in decisions of what the group should look like, how it would meet, etc. The ministerial meeting should espouse the same norms that would govern the meetings of technical groups going forward: Namely, a focus on finding substantive middle ground. An exchange of ideas across formal division in the quest for “good solutions.” This was communicated beforehand via technical negotiators of the invited countries.

Andrea remembers sending out a simple and uniform initial invite—which went from her minister’s office to the ministry offices of the recipients. The meeting was by invitation only. Most of the countries invited came. The decisions of countries to not attend was assumed to be based on their political positions or political concerns. Of the invited African countries, none attended the first meeting.

## Choosing a Setting

The first meeting was held in March 2010, only three months after the Copenhagen COP. The Colombian Minister intentionally chose for this first meeting to be in Cartagena, a beautiful port city on the northern coast of Columbia that they believed would be more welcoming and have a relaxed atmosphere.

Because this first meeting took place at the ministerial level, the group decided not to get too deeply into technical issues. According to the leadership team, the two most important considerations of this inaugural meeting were: 1) building community of trust and openness and 2) getting agreement on core principles. “To me, the first was more important than the latter,” Andrea explains: “People had been shattered by Copenhagen and were wondering whether the process can get anything done. More than anything, we wanted them to leave with hope.”<sup>viii</sup>

Faced with the challenges of a limited budget, Andrea needed to get creative to build the right conditions for such a meeting, which took place in a house that was owned by an organization from a European government. The UK and Australia paid for the flights and hotel rooms for delegates from developing countries—efforts that ensured that this meeting was affordable for everyone. Andrea and her Minister spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about how to create the right ambiance. They wanted the ministerial meeting to espouse the same dynamics of open and trustful discussions as the “small group meeting” in Copenhagen. Andrea wanted ministers to feel at home and like people, rather than country officials, so that they could think and speak freely. The meeting needed to feel special and different.

Thus, they organized a big welcoming dinner for all in attendance. Participants of this first meeting recall fresh fruit everywhere and toucans flying onto open porches of the hotel they were staying at. With the help of her minister, Andrea had procured Guayaberas, a typical Caribbean summer shirt, for all ministers. Everyone was invited to a dinner with local dancing groups. The attire and activities went a long way to strip away typical protocol. “There was this feeling of people just being people.”<sup>ix</sup> Activities from the first meetings would become traditions of future Cartagena Dialogue convenings: In Bali, there was Balinese dancers; in the Maldives, the minister started dancing. At some COPs, ministers would even show up wearing their Guayabera from this first meeting.

## The “Meeting”

At the time of the first meeting, no name for the format had been chosen. It was referred to simply as “the Meeting.” The ministers focused on high-level substantive discussions on the need to create new pathways for climate action within the multilateral regime to overcome the difficult and distrustful political environment that Copenhagen had unearthed. They discussed the need for a

legally binding agreement and the need for emissions reduction contributions by high emitting developing countries in service of a 2-degree pathway. In a deliberate effort not to get carried away by process discussions, any procedural concerns had been addressed in advance at the technical level. When people expressed uncertainty or concerns to Andrea and the team about “what type of group this was,” often motivated by fears of “siding with the enemy” Andrea and others leaned on the informality of the meeting and stressed that this would be a forum for open conversations. The goal was—as would become the motto going forward—to discuss how to make progress and learn from one another rather than getting entangled in procedural discussions: “We are franker with each other, and we don’t negotiate. We share our views. And then we try to take other members’ views into consideration.”<sup>x</sup> In line with this goal, the group established that it would never create formal positions. It also set a rule that would remain a fixture of the group: they wrote nothing down as “joint statements.”<sup>xi</sup> Common ground was registered, sometimes even text was drafted reflecting it. But it was never highlighted as “joint text.” Each person would just take it back home and work internally in their government to move towards that common ground.

After the second day of the meeting, the group realized that despite their desire not to create anything “too formal” it would be useful to create some tangible outcome for the meeting—a unique balancing act that the Cartagena Dialogue would need to consider over its entire lifetime. “We thought a high-level statement reflecting the core values and priorities of the participants would be good to have, and it became clear that there was actually a mandate from the ministers that we should work towards the priority goals at their level and at the technical level.”<sup>xii</sup> A summary statement could mandate negotiators to continue making progress on these priorities. The chair of the first meeting, the Minister from Colombia, would produce a summary of what was heard. Robert, Pete, and Andrea would review the summary the night before disseminating it to people. The summary was simple, general, and reflective of identified areas of agreement and priorities. All Ministers reacted positively to the summary, which prompted no dissenting voices. No concrete follow-up or next steps were established at the end of this first meeting, other than a mandate for teams to continue to work together. As Andrea remembers, “everyone had faith that we would figure it out.” The Maldives Minister offered to host the next Cartagena meeting and there was consensus from the participants to keep in touch.

It was also during this first meeting, that the format was named. Up until the ministers convened in Cartagena, the convening had ambiguously been referred to as “the Meeting.” Everyone maintained that they wanted to keep this as informal as possible and were conscious of using a framing that didn’t make their meeting sound official or contentious. At one point, Andrea even remembers proposing to not call it anything because “as soon as you call it anything, you can screw it up.”<sup>xiii</sup> Yet it was soon clear that they were organizing a faction that would develop into something beyond a makeshift group of friends operating only in emergency mode. They would need a name. Australia proposed for this group to be named in honor of the host city, Cartagena. “Dialogue” is not an official classification under the UNFCCC rules and, as such, would not be catalogued as anything. This loose definition felt right to all present.

## What Cartagena Became

### Procedural Practices

After the first ministerial meeting, the newly formed Cartagena Dialogue began having regular calls at the negotiator level and convening small group meetings during Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) and COP meetings. The SBSTA is one of two permanent subsidiary bodies to the Convention established by the COP to provide advice on scientific and technological matters as they relate to the Convention, protocols, and agreements. As time went on, the Cartagena Dialogue started meeting regularly during various types of UNFCCC convenings. Participation varied as it could be hard, especially for those from developing countries with smaller delegations, to find the time and manpower to partake. These representatives often had to prioritize official meetings over this informal dialogue.<sup>xiv</sup> Sometimes they would add a day or two of Cartagena gatherings at the end of official UNFCCC meetings. Eventually, the group was convening annually. While ministers participated in the first 2010 Cartagena meeting, they rarely did thereafter, except during COPs. The regular members tended to be senior and junior negotiators, professionals, and state officials.<sup>xv</sup>

Since the main goal of the group was to facilitate solutions across issues that are of key importance for the multilateral regime, the group would begin aligning their work on official UNFCCC negotiation issues: mainly mitigation, but later on others, e.g., adaptation, finance, technology transfer, national reporting, and loss and damage.<sup>xvi</sup> Lead teams were set up for each issues that were made up of a smaller group of countries that was particularly invested in it. The lead teams were tasked with drafting discussion notes at Cartagena meetings—an initial step in the process of bridging North and South interests on specific issues<sup>xvii</sup>—before disseminating their bridgebuilding notes to other members. These notes would then be discussed and modified with the larger group, which never took a formal vote nor made a decision on these notes.<sup>xviii</sup> This process was intentionally chosen to maintain the identity of the Cartagena Dialogue primarily as a facilitative platform for cooperation and coordination among its members, rather than a decision-making body. Cartagena members could use the notes for developing their own formal proposals within their respective political groups; propose their own interpretation of the notes at larger UNFCCC negotiations; or build on them for other means.<sup>xix</sup> Yet, they could never refer to these as Cartagena positions and would very rarely take any information to the media. One time a member deviated from this norm and cited a position by the Cartagena Dialogue in a formal meeting in Bonn. That member was immediately taken to the side by other members and informed that it violated the group customs.<sup>xx</sup> As one member noted in a confidential interview: “The biggest success is that the C[artagena] D[ialogue] is quiet. It works quietly at the COPs.”<sup>xxi</sup>

A less direct but key source influence of the group was simply a deeper understanding: The conversations at the technical level proved very beneficial in furthering understanding of the capacities and reasons for countries’ positions on critical issues. Often these considerations would be noted by members to their respective lead negotiator and ministers, which in turn informed that countries’ formal negotiation approach.

The collaboration often ended up directly influencing actual negotiations. When notes from the Cartagena Dialogue showed up in the formal positions of certain countries (without referring to Cartagena as the source), there was a strong likelihood that other Cartagena members participants would support this proposal. Over time, support strategies became more deliberate. Members would sometimes informally coordinate how they championed common positions. When one member spoke up in plenary with a certain opinion, another member, often from the “other side” (i.e., a developing country followed by a developed country or vice versa) would come in to endorse that view. Over time, participants began discussing the order by which speakers would come in in advance of meetings to ensure that common points were understood to be shared across various groups.

## The Cartagena Dialogue in the Run-up to Cancún and Durban

Cartagena is credited as particularly important in the run-up to COP16 in Cancún and Durban. A member of the Mexican presidency reports using the Cartagena Dialogue as a sounding board and inspiration for acceptable proposals.<sup>xxii</sup> They reported that Cartagena had done some of the work that the incoming Mexican Presidency was bound to do. The Dialogue was “an attractive partner because Cartagena has put in many efforts to explore common ground across North–South and regions on dividing issues.”<sup>xxiii</sup> The Presidency turned to Cartagena members to develop compromises and test its ideas for compromise<sup>xxiv</sup> because Cartagena members had spent a lot of time carefully crafting and fine-tuning middle-ground options.<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, many of the substantive outcomes of the Cancún and Durban (and later Paris) agreements were very much driven by the way that the Cartagena Dialogue had approached the issue. Compromises on monitoring, reporting, and verification that foresaw more ambitious reporting in return for funding for capacity building is believed to be the consequence of such proposals by Cartagena Dialogue members. Moreover, a compromise struck at Durban—where parties committed to continue working towards a legally binding agreement whilst agreeing to a second commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol—partly goes back to text that had been produced during the Cartagena Dialogue’s fifth meeting in Samoa.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## Building and Using Process Power at COPs

Beyond producing text and technical insights that would affect the outcome, the group would also use procedural interventions to impact negotiations. At COP17 in December 2011, for instance, the Presidency was planning to put forth a deal to the plenary that did not foresee legally binding obligations. The Presidency planned to propose the deal and suggested that there was consensus for such an agreement. Members of the Cartagena Dialogue were informed of this proposal in advance and quickly contacted each other. If there actually was consensus each individual country would agree; none of them wanted to be the sole dissenter. But after talking to each other they quickly understood that actually there was no consensus for this agreement at all. They were all opposed to such a compromise and quickly mobilized to reject the proposed deal in a coordinated way. They planned to come in to oppose the text and supported each other. To do so, they monitored the plenary carefully. When a representative takes the floor, a light comes on in front of them. Thus, delegates (even those in the Cartagena Dialogue who had not been able to

meet in person before the vote) would watch where a light would come on and immediately raise their hand electronically to support their colleagues' intervention. The coordinated voices across various groups—from the EU to G77 members (including AILAC countries, LDCs, and SIDS) as well as members of the Environmental Integrity Group—signaled that there was, in fact, no consensus. The Presidency was surprised when the deal was rejected by many developed and developing countries in plenary, having believed there would be support for the agreement. Consequently, the Presidency was forced to pause plenary and led several high-level negotiators to lead the famous and impromptu “Durban Huddle” on the plenary floor, which occurred in full view of observers and the press. Members of the Dialogue were part of this huddle, which ultimately came up with modified language about the legal nature of the agreement.

## Building and Using Process Power in formal coalitions

This mode of coordinated interventions also became important within South-South coalitions. The G77+China has a working mode whereby everything that is concluded to become a formal position of the group is “informally binding” to all members. De facto, this means that no G77 member can deviate from this position in formal negotiations. While any member of the G77 could technically break such positions, in practice it could be politically and personally costly to be the sole dissenting voice. Cartagena members report being subject to personal accusations in G77 forums, of being accused of “siding with the North,” and of being reminded of the dangers of being tainted a “collaborators with the enemy.”<sup>xxvii</sup> When this would happen, other Cartagena Dialogue participants acted as supportive allies inside and outside of negotiations. Andrea remembers “spending more time with these people than my friends back home, given the amount of time we were at negotiation meetings.” In these forums, the Cartagena Dialogue was somewhat of an odd grouping; countries acted as members of a more formal group in these settings by having coordinated their positions, yet, without the typical procedures of having enshrined those positions in some joint text. In addition, the membership of the Cartagena Dialogue changed substantially over time and was driven by individuals rather than countries. This made it harder, though certainly not impossible, for countries opposed to the Cartagena Dialogue to call out their actions. Non-participants also described the Cartagena Dialogue in unusual terms, depicting them as a group of “technical experts who seemed more like friends than a political association,”<sup>xxviii</sup> illustrating the special nature of this group.

## The Ebbs and Flow

Cartagena's membership varied over time, as negotiators joined and left—a dynamic that was referred to as the “ebbs and flow” of participation. Invitation was always predicated on a combination of personality and country positions. If a government's position changed too drastically and counteracted the foundational principles of the Cartagena Dialogue, representatives weren't invited to the next meeting. If a new technical negotiator began representing a country that had regularly been invited but they were not perceived to act in the spirit of the Dialogue, they would not be invited again. For example, Australia, despite being a founding member of the Cartagena Dialogue stopped being invited to these meetings as a result of governmental shift in positions, right after the 2011 Durban COP.



## Building Trust and Understanding One Another

Beyond substance, a crucial component of the Cartagena Dialogue has always been “building stronger personal ties through social events like dinners where participants get to know each other better.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Especially during the high intensity moments of COP discussions, trust among Cartagena members was critical. “You would hear people differently if they made interventions. When you are under intense stress at a COP and someone reports something, you often jump to the most malicious assumption about their intentions. With Cartagena members it was different. You would listen because you trusted that there must be legitimate reason behind what they said. And there always was.”<sup>xxx</sup> This trust enabled Cartagena members to call on one another in critical moments, like Pete and Kaveh did with Andrea in Cancun.

Moreover, some participants report that having engaged in many trusted discussions over time enabled a deeper form of understanding that wouldn’t otherwise have been possible. One long-standing Cartagena Dialogue member from a developed country reports a striking episode: during the final stages of Subsidiary Bodies (SBs) deliberation around adaptation, a developing country counterpart “effectively asked to have the word “adaptation” appear in the text as often as possible.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Whilst many negotiators from developed countries were confused by the ask, hoping for more details, that person reports having a moment of realization. They realized that developing countries, even within the trusted spaces of the Cartagena Dialogue, had erroneously “sat back” waiting for developing countries to be the ones to bring forward technical proposals. At that moment, said negotiator realized that what they were actually being asked was to take thought leadership on the issue of adaptation, in a similar vein as they had with mitigation. “There was a huge difference in resources. The EU has an entire floor of people who does nothing but accounting of GHG emissions. The Colombian delegation has maybe one person on that issue and can send five people to a COP. And somehow we were sitting there leaning back waiting for them to come up with technical proposals, which, given the resource disparity, they just couldn’t. I understood then that we had failed our colleagues and we needed to take a lead on the issue. I was only able to hear this because we had spent hours in the room trying to understand each other.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Internally, the EU started to take the issue of adaptation more seriously, focusing on what technical aspects could look like. This shift in understanding changed the course of the debate.

## A Critical Look at the Cartagena Dialogue

### Progress on Mitigation and Conflict on Finance

Despite the positive experiences expressed by its members, the Cartagena Dialogue has received criticism for not being able to repeat its success in establishing common ground in mitigation topics when it came to the topics on finance, especially for adaptation and Loss and Damages. Andrea reports that discussions became harder and more conflictual when discussing finance<sup>xxxiii</sup>—a sentiment echoed by people with a more critical outside view on the Cartagena Dialogue. A negotiator from ALBA who wished to remain anonymous, for example, notes that “until now, that ‘group of friends’ just cannot figure out the issue of finance. They [Cartagena countries] still need the G77 as a home to advance their interests on finance.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> In that person’s perception, while the Cartagena Dialogue might have been a good forum for technical solutions, its format



struggled to facilitate and deliver on more complex and holistic discussions involving problematic political tradeoffs such as with finance.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Andrea readily admits that discussions were not as productive when the substantive interests were too misaligned. The parties could address constraints around mitigation because they were aligned at the principle-level. Conversations regarding finances, on the other hand, were more dictated by diametrically opposed red lines and strict ministerial mandates. Many delegates from developed countries had Ministers of Finance who were unwilling to commit to financial agreements and/or specific numbers. Tight wallets of developed countries contrasted with the immediate financial needs of developing countries. The Cartagena group was not immune from the reality that “touching money always makes issues more prickly.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> According to critics, Cartagena’s inability to make progress on finance is linked to a broader problem of the Cartagena Dialogue being too exclusionary to dissenting voices.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

## No Space for Dissenters

While at its heart the Cartagena Dialogue had the idea of building bridges across divides, there is little doubt that it had clear boundaries for how wide this divide was allowed to be. Their core principles established this boundary. If members were perceived as having too dissimilar opinions on core issues, such as the legally binding nature of an agreement or responsibility to reduce emissions, they were simply uninvited. For example, a negotiator from an African country who wished to remain anonymous was invited to join several Dialogue meetings by friends of his from the Colombian and Swedish delegation.<sup>xxxviii</sup> After attending a few of these meetings, he echoes the sentiment that other members shared; reporting an openness to challenge each other without finger-pointing to the end of “creating more ambitious outcomes.”<sup>xxxix</sup> However, at some point he was simply uninvited. He suspects it had to do with him expressing deep historical injustices that need to be rectified by developed countries. In 2010, he reportedly gave an impassioned 12-minute speech when only allotted three minutes of time. “I could not be stopped,”<sup>xl</sup> he reports about his speech that was advocating for the rights of African countries, who were bearing the brunt of the costs of the climate crisis while being responsible for barely any of GHG emissions. He scolded developed countries for taking insufficient action and not living up to their historical responsibilities. He was never invited to Cartagena again. He suspects that Cartagena Dialogue members perceived his speech as insufficiently technical and feeding into a divisive narrative.

Another interviewee from a developing country notes that he was not alone in this fate and that, for many African countries, attending the Dialogue meetings was hard as it seemed that there was little space to voice the fundamental injustices African countries were subjected to.<sup>xli</sup>

In addition, one interview participant reports that the Cartagena group unsettled some African countries, especially its claim of being progressive: “Progressive felt like something subjective, not from the Convention.”<sup>xlii</sup> Cartagena’s self-proclaimed “progressive” label was perceived by many who were not invited to the group as somewhat of an indirect insult. By exclusion, they were thereby branded as “non-progressive.” Within the African group the term “progressive” became somewhat of a term jokingly used to describe oneself. After powerful speeches about historical injustices, for example, African negotiators would comment “I guess I’m not progressive enough”

ridiculing the Cartagena Dialogue.<sup>xliii</sup> US delegates similarly reported that they thought the label “progressive” was ridiculous and note that the Cartagena Dialogue was in many ways an attempt by the EU and UK to regain relevance.<sup>xliiv</sup>

A negotiator from an ALBA country describes the Cartagena Dialogue in a similar sentiment. In her view, the format was premised on a problematic, simplistic dichotomy between “the good ones” and “the bad ones”—an “us versus them” mentality that had helped espouse the behind-closed-doors negotiation during the Copenhagen COP. She describes the premise of Cartagena in plain, somewhat ironic, terms: “We are the good ones that want to agree and save the world and be nice and agree a framework and then there is this other group of bad countries who don’t want to agree. We will just get together and figure it out. And if we do, we will be stronger during COP facing the bad ones during the COP. It felt like high-school cliques that excluded countries who are needed to make progress together with all countries.”<sup>xliv</sup> This perception that the Cartagena Dialogue is premised on the exclusion of non-progressives strongly contrasts with its self-assessment as a coalition intended to strengthen multilateralism.

## Awakening a “Dormant Giant:” The Rise of the Like-Minded Developing Countries

Whilst the Cartagena Dialogue played a major role in the run-up to the Cancun COP and in fostering understanding across developed and developing countries, it arguably produced unintended consequences. Known as “the Elders,” there had long been a core group within that G77 that was informally coordinating positions and tactics, even prior to COP15 in Copenhagen. It has “been there for a while [...] as sort of a dormant giant.”<sup>xlvi</sup> This group would formalize as the Like-Minded Developing Countries, the LMDC, and began making joint submissions and statements in 2012.<sup>xlvii</sup>

The LMDC positions are centered around four key characteristics that stand in contrast to the key tenets of the Cartagena Dialogue:

*“First, LMDC perceives itself as an integral part of the G77 and as the “true” voice of developing countries. Second, LMDC is the guardian of the Convention and its principles, most importantly, CBDR-RC [Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities] and equity. Third, developing countries are the victims of climate change, not the culprits. Historically, they have contributed very little to global climate change. Fourth, even if developed countries must take the lead, developing countries—including the LMDC as coalition and individual countries—are not “blockers,” but actively contribute to global climate action.”<sup>xlviii</sup>*

The tension between the LMDC group and Cartagena Dialogue becomes striking when considering how Pete Betts describes what united Cartagena at its origin: “What characterized the group was a deep frustration with the adversarial nature of the formal negotiations, and a sense that some countries were using process disruption to get in the way of progress.”<sup>xlix</sup>

Initially created by 22 countries—amongst those, China, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, and the ALBA countries—the LMDC progressively grew in membership.<sup>1</sup> Similar to the Cartagena Dialogue, the exact number is hard to establish, as membership varies. Some countries actively participate in driving the LMDC as a policy platform whilst other members use the LMDC

as a platform to promote specific positions they subscribe to, in return for not opposing other LMDC positions that they otherwise would.<sup>li</sup>

The rise of the LMDC was not a direct reaction to the Cartagena Dialogue;<sup>lii</sup> but it was a direct reaction to some of the impacts generated by the Cartagena Dialogue. Over the years, it had become harder to achieve consensus on LMDC core priorities in the G77+China, which was “linked to the fact that a few (mainly Latin-American) developing countries started to coordinate their positions more closely with developed countries through the meetings of the Cartagena Dialogue, and with each other through AILAC.”<sup>liii</sup> SIDS were also increasingly coordinating. One LMDC member put it more bluntly, questioning some of the statements of Cartagena members during G77+China meetings: “Is this the developing country speaking or the EU?”<sup>liiv</sup> A platform by which to promote LMDC’s core priorities was missing from the G77 and doing so had become harder within the traditional forum. The timing of the LMDC inception is also revealing: The Durban Platform had been established at COP17 in 2011 and the Ad-hoc Working Group on the Durban Platform had become a negotiating track towards a new climate regime.<sup>liv</sup> The Durban Platform mandated the negotiation of an agreement that would be “applicable to all” with no explicit reference made to the principles of equity or CBDR.<sup>livi</sup> This was seen a huge setback for countries promoting the upholding of this firewall.

Over the course of time, the LMDC has become extremely influential within the G77+China and globally. Given the membership of powerful countries, including China, India, the ALBA countries, as well as Saudi Arabia, and the fact that those countries represent a huge share of the global population, the LMDC wields considerable political weight. And it has been very effective in shaping the broader G77+China position to plant red lines by a combination of strong connections and deploying technical, legal and political advice to other G77+China countries.<sup>li vii</sup> There are many official statements of the G77+China that can be directly linked to text that was initially proposed by the LMDC.<sup>li viii</sup>

The rhetoric and narrative employed by the LMDC and the positions it supports markedly contrast with the Cartagena priorities and appear to embody the voice for which Cartagena did not leave much space. A statement by the Malaysian delegate during COP21 on behalf of the LMDC exemplifies both the substantive arguments and rhetoric with which the LMDC promotes its priorities:

*“Historical responsibility and historical debt has not changed... You grew to this level of prosperity because you burnt fossil fuel at an unabated rate. You created that situation which has created this problem for us. You created the problem and now you say that we want you to share—on an equal basis—the responsibility... The division of the world in terms of poor and rich has not changed. We represent half the world. We have two-thirds of the poor in our part of the world. That has not changed. If this has not changed, we have to look at the Convention, which looks into these realities. You are trying to freeze the development pace of developing countries. This is the message we want to give you... You talk of countries like India, China. Do people stop industrialization that meets the needs of the country? Do people stop eating? These are the hard truths... You signed on the Convention. It was in 1992. You acknowledged historical responsibility. You acknowledged differentiation... but now you are resigning from your obligations. You*

*assumed legally binding obligations, which you have not fulfilled. You took on obligations under the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol, but you did not fulfill them. You refused to commit to the second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. You committed to the US \$100 billion (a year by 2020), but where has the commitment been realized? It has not been realized. When you took on these obligations, the world had not changed, but you say the world has changed now when we want to do the Paris agreement. Is this to deflect the responsibility you took upon yourself?"<sup>lix</sup>*

One difference between the organization of the LMDC and the Cartagena Dialogue, namely that the LMDC established a formal negotiation group, illuminates further issues the Cartagena Dialogue faced.

## The Challenges of Informality

The LMDC is formally organized as a coalition under the G77+China; it is a subgroup.<sup>lx</sup> The Cartagena Dialogue, in contrast, was an informal group, which, as noted above, brought with it benefits of learning and open dialogue but also structural challenges. Some have suggested that the establishment of the Independent Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC) countries, a formal coalition that comprises many Cartagena members and subscribes to very similar positions, was the natural extension from informality to formality, allowing it to make submissions and statements.<sup>lxi</sup>

The lack of formal recognition within the UNFCCC provided challenges in international negotiations; COP Presidencies did not have to include Cartagena as there was no formal obligation to listen to it as a group;<sup>lxii</sup> and the group had drawn some strong opponents from big emitter countries as well developing countries who wanted more significant compromises than Cartagena was supporting.<sup>lxiii</sup> Cartagena was only included indirectly. Presidencies included its different individual members indirectly because of the heterogenous membership of the Cartagena Dialogue and if individuals were not present, the ones that were made a point of briefing other members later. Given its expertise and the work it had put into finding solutions across developed and developing countries, it was sought after especially by Presidencies but its legitimacy derives from that knowledge and having pre-identified common ground not from recognition as a formal group rooted in some common identity.

This is linked to the challenges of maintaining this source of legitimacy over time.<sup>lxiv</sup> When people leave the field, they take all the embodied knowledge with them; without a Secretariat or other body there is less of a body of documentation and mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge across generations.

## Cartagena Today

The Cartagena Dialogue exists until today and still espouses the same norms that were established at the beginning. Many of the originators of the format have left the climate regime and many of the interview participants agree that it does not exhibit the same creative force and influence that it used to. Interview participants from within and outside the Dialogue offer various reasons, all of which are somewhat speculative. Some speculate that its lesser influence might be

due to the fact that the mitigation agenda has proceeded beyond the technical details and, thus, there is simply less need for this format. The remaining discussions on finance and adaptation, they note, are more political in nature and require higher level involvement. Formats such as the High Ambition Coalition, they note, which have similar aspirations but meet at a higher political level are better suited they claim. Others note that the strict bifurcation in the climate regime has loosened in sentiment and institutionally addressed in the Paris Accords with again others noting that it is back on the rise calling for a revival of such formats on new priority issues such as Loss & Damages. Again others highlight that the pressing questions are migrating from text negotiations to negotiating the implementation of the regime, which might simply require a profound shift in the focus of discussions that has yet to take place. And a last thread emerged of people noting that a key ingredient to the success of the Cartagena Dialogue was its secrecy which simply faded over time as its successes became increasingly visible.

Cartagena's future is unclear. But there is little doubt amongst anyone that despite its shortcomings it played a prominent role to recenter negotiations at a time when conflict was high, and the multilateral climate regime was in question.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Lau Øfjord Blaxekjær, "Diplomatic Learning and Trust. How the Cartagena Dialogue Brought UN Climate Negotiation Back on Track and Helped Deliver the Paris Agreement," in *Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations*, ed. Carola Klöck et al., Routledge Research in Global Environmental Governance (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 99.

<sup>ii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>iii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>iv</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>v</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>vi</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>vii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>viii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>ix</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>x</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 103 (Table 6.1, Interview 3).

<sup>xi</sup> Interview with Kaveh Guilanpour.

<sup>xii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>xiii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>xiv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 103.

<sup>xv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 99.

<sup>xvi</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 104.

<sup>xvii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 105.

<sup>xviii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 105.

<sup>xix</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 105.

<sup>xx</sup> Interview with Kaveh Guilanpour.

<sup>xxi</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 104 (Table 6.1, Interview 3).

<sup>xxii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 103.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 93.

<sup>xxv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 61.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Bowering, Ethan "After Kyoto: the Cartagena Dialogue and the future of the international climate change regime: Prepared for the 2011 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change COP17." Griffith University. globalvoices. November 2011.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxix</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 102.

<sup>xxx</sup> Interview with Kaveh Guilanpour..

<sup>xxxi</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xl</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xli</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xlii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xliii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xliiii</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xliv</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

<sup>xlv</sup> Anonymous interview participant.

- <sup>xvii</sup> Anonymous interviewee (Table 7.2, Interview 1) cited in Lau Øfjord Blaxekjær et al., "The Narrative Position of the Like-Minded Developing Countries in Global Climate Negotiations," in *Coalitions in the Climate Change Negotiations*, ed. Carola Klöck et al., Routledge Research in Global Environmental Governance (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 118.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 117.
- <sup>xix</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 114.
- <sup>xx</sup> Pete Betts, "The EU's Role in the Paris Agreement," in *Negotiating the Paris Agreement*, ed. Henrik Jepsen et al., 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 120, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108886246.007>.
- <sup>i</sup> Rene Orellana Halkyer, "COP 21 – Complaints and Negotiation: The Role of the Like-Minded Developing Countries Group (LMDC) and the Paris Agreement," in *Negotiating the Paris Agreement*, ed. Henrik Jepsen et al., 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 160, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108886246.009>.
- <sup>ii</sup> Halkyer, 161.
- <sup>iii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., "The Narrative Position of the Like-Minded Developing Countries in Global Climate Negotiations," 118.
- <sup>iv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 118.
- <sup>v</sup> Anonymous interview participant.
- <sup>vi</sup> Blaxekjær et al., "The Narrative Position of the Like-Minded Developing Countries in Global Climate Negotiations," 117–18.
- <sup>vii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 118.
- <sup>viii</sup> Halkyer, "COP 21 – Complaints and Negotiation," 169.
- <sup>ix</sup> Halkyer, 170.
- <sup>x</sup> Cited in Halkyer, 167–68.
- <sup>xi</sup> Blaxekjær et al., "The Narrative Position of the Like-Minded Developing Countries in Global Climate Negotiations," 171.
- <sup>xii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 106.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 106–7.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 106.
- <sup>xv</sup> Blaxekjær et al., 107.

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