TURN the TIDE

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Towards a New Climate Alliance: The Cartagena Dialogue

Part 1

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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."*

Hammering out the last details in a small hotel room

In the last days of COP16 in Cancun, Mexico, Andrea Guerrero García, Colombia's lead negotiator, was taking a rare quiet moment for herself. Kaveh Guilanpour, a United Kingdom negotiator and good friend of Andrea's, walked past her, handed her a crumpled piece of paper, and walked on without sharing details. This piece of paper led Andrea to a small hotel room where about 10 predominantly male, high-ranking Heads of Delegation were negotiating the pinch points of the COP16. They were in intense conversations about how to anchor the Cancun pledges in the final outcome; a debate had arisen over which countries would be the pledges. Andrea, a technical negotiator, recalls "feeling like a very small person in a very big room."

There were very few chairs for people to sit—a deliberate choice to limit the number of attendees, Andrea suspects. Andrea spotted Kaveh sitting on a ledge next to Pete Betts, the lead negotiator for the United Kingdom. She knew both well since Andrea, Kaveh, Pete, and many others had spent countless hours over the last year working together towards creating a new alliance, the Cartagena Dialogue. Recounting the story over a decade later, Andrea says, "I still need to ask Kaveh why they invited me of all people." When telling stories from that time, Andrea repeatedly recalls that "people somehow overlooked that I wasn't the right level." Kaveh recounts that him and Pete had discussed who would be a helpful voice in that room after the Presidency had decided to convene a group. Andrea, he explains, was crucially important given her deep understanding of the varying positions of developing and developed countries and, more importantly, the concerns underlying those positions. Per Kaveh, "We needed someone who understands and who we can trust." Given their many conversations as part of the Cartagena Dialogue, they understood that she would be the right fit. And, as he notes, "one thing is for sure. Andrea has never been a small person in any room."

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The Post-Copenhagen hangover: A Hotbed of Change and New Alliances

COP15 in 2009 in Copenhagen had ended in a diplomatic disaster and in agreement that was not adopted but only "taken note" of. It left the legal character of the agreement unclear and importantly, it left the public as well as many negotiators deeply disappointed. Many diplomats from across the world to leave climate work altogether. Those who chose to stay in the field found themselves in a context of deepened rifts between

countries and in a new debate on whether climate policy should be discussed within what many perceived to be a cumbersome multilateral process or whether more nimble negotiation formats of "coalitions of the willing" and large emitters would be better suited.

The North-South Divide is Deepening

In the hopes of combating the climate change crisis, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) bodies and procedures had originally been established so that the international community could negotiate across geographic, political, and cultural divides. During Copenhagen that aspiration had not been met. Pre-Copenhagen, an increasing number of countries had entered the space of international climate negotiations. With the rising prominence of the climate regime and its reach across new issue areas, more countries began understanding and formalizing their self-interest with respect to the regime. This led to an organization of these interests into various coalitions and negotiating groups, with negotiators often being tasked with defending national histories and interests. Yet, these structural delineations arguably deepened entrenched divides; most importantly, between countries that had historically been grouped as "developed" or "developing." This wedge is enshrined in the very foundation of the regime, in the UNFCCC. The Framework Convention established the principle of "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" (CBDR), whereby developed country parties would take the lead on combating climate change given their historic responsibilities in producing the overwhelming share of emissions. The Kyoto Protocol in 1992 had operationalized this distinction by legally obliging only developed countries to reduce emissions and leaving it voluntary for developing countries. The list of who is considered developed and developing was not based on changing conditions but was a fixed list based on conditions in 1990s.

Attempts by developed countries during the 2009 Copenhagen COP to begin loosening this distinction and to establish a new climate regime without such a clear bifurcation had failed. Indeed, Copenhagen arguably sharpened the divide between nations with different historical responsibilities for greenhouse gas emissions, as well as different levels of institutional knowledge, capacity, and wealth.[i] As one senior negotiator from a developing country put it, "some countries felt like [developed ones] are not delivering, so why should we go the extra mile? At the time, it really felt like it was 'us' versus 'them'."[ii] Developed countries, especially the US, were perceived by many as failing to live up to their historic responsibility by refusing to commit to legally binding emissions reduction targets. They were not willing to "walk the talk" on their stated importance on combating climate change.

Moreover, the process leadership by Denmark had deepened distrust against a regime that was supposed to mediate these voices. The UNFCCC process had been established as a vehicle to be inclusive of the most vulnerable voices. Copenhagen called that premise into question by shutting out many countries during the ending stage of negotiations when de facto a small group consisting of Brazil, China, India, South Africa and the US was negotiating a final text. The "Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas" (ALBA) is paradigmatic of this rift. Formed in the aftermath of Copenhagen, ALBA comprised mainly the Latin American countries that had led the objection to adopting the Copenhagen Accord. Its main architects promoted a "Bolivarian vision" of regional solidarity formed in opposition to the US and a "neoliberal" approach to climate policies, and crucially, it was predicated on an uncompromising interpretation of the CBDR principle.[iii]

South-South Rifts are Emerging

North-South relations were not the only ones that were strained at COP15. New rifts had opened within these blocks:

The BASIC group, comprised of Brazil, South Africa, India, and China, had coordinated a joint negotiation approach just before Copenhagen and, alongside the US, had dominated the discussions in Copenhagen. Not all developing countries within the largest developing country block (the G77+China) that represents more than 130 developing countries were fully pleased with their presumed leaders, the BASIC, engaging in "behind closed doors" negotiations that excluded their voices.

In addition, several developing countries within the G77+China were of the view that BASIC should in fact contribute more to emissions reductions, rather than insisting on their status as large developing countries. BASIC had become one of "the hardest coalitions in the G77"[iv] and was considered by some as the "villains" of Copenhagen. Despite their rising emissions, the group had refused calls to partake in legally binding emission reductions, insisted on their identity as developing countries, and advanced the interests of G77+China by upholding the principle of "Common But Differentiated Responsibilities." Small Islands Developing States (SIDS), several Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and Latin American countries, such as Colombia and Costa Rica—all of which were organized as part of the G77+China—did not fully support this approach. Given their vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, they increasingly voiced that forcefully combating climate change would mean that countries such as the ones in BASIC would need to reduce emissions and, thus, exerted increasing pressure on BASIC to do so.

What is more, many of the countries who promoted more ambitious action felt frustrated at times with the use of process disruptions to stymy progress and took issue with being lumped together with G77 countries who they perceived as blocking progress at all costs. Even within the BASIC coalition, tension increased as South Africa and Brazil took a more conciliatory approach after Copenhagen, whilst China and India aligned more closely with each other, insisting on their developing country status.

North-North Rifts are emerging

On the other side, new tensions emerged between the European Union (EU) and the US. Many EU delegates felt betrayed when the US decided to "walk it alone" and craft a backroom deal with the

BASIC group in Copenhagen. They also expressed frustration of being lumped together with the US as "developed countries" who are underdelivering even though their ambitions (and their delivery on past obligations) diverged widely from the US.

Multilateralism in Question

These rising tensions between countries and within traditional coalitions coincided with a broader fear, especially by vulnerable countries and European countries, that the multilateral regime might be abandoned as the primary forum for climate change action. The "inclusive" process had demonstrably failed to deliver an "inclusive" outcome. Right after Copenhagen there was no existing international legal structure since the Copenhagen Accord had not been ratified. The following year, at the Bonn Climate change talks,[v] Christiana Figueres spoke for Costa Rica to highlight that "the discussion is not just about process but about the credibility of the UNFCCC in terms of whether it can constructively move forward."[vi] Delegates from Turkey, supported by Papua New Guinea, noted the need for "damage control" since UN rules and procedures had been challenged in Copenhagen.[vii] It became clear that for the upcoming COP16 in Cancun a key priority would be to reestablish trust in the process, as key players highlighted that "a further breakdown in fresh discussions this fortnight could spell the end of the UN multilateral negotiating process."[viii]

It was in this geopolitical context—strained North-South, South-South, and North-North relations, as well as a fear of waning importance of the multilateral process—that a few people got together to consider how to launch what would eventually become known as the Cartagena Dialogue.

The Cartagena Dialogue

Pete Betts, Robert Owen Jones, and Andrea Guerrero García's Alignment of Stars

Only a few weeks after COP15, Pete Betts (from the UK delegation) and Robert Owen Jones (from the Australian delegation) contacted Andrea Guerrero García, a Colombian negotiator. They wanted to discuss the prospects of continuing conversations that had started in a small room at the end of COP15 and maintain the trusted conversations between developed and developing countries in pursuit of more ambitious climate action within the multilateral regime. The group would form around the same circle that had been present in the room including representatives from Sweden, Barbados, Mexico, the Marshall Islands, and several other countries. Pete and Robert had decided that Andrea would be the right person to initiate the first steps in creating a forum for these conversations—a choice that surprised her. As she recalls, the prospect of taking a leadership position in crafting some type of alliance was "completely above my pay grade." Guerrero García had just poked her head out from the role of a technical, issue-specific negotiator to a more cross-cutting political role in Copenhagen. She was thrust into that position by accident as her issue, mitigation, became the central one in the negotiations at the time. Her lead negotiator put her in the driver seat given her technical experience. That said, by COP15, she had already built a strong reputation. According to those close to Pete, the decision to call Andrea was "fairly obvious really." Some people are so "self-selecting; you don't even need to make a choice."[ix]

Andrea was a forestry expert and had been brought on with Colombia's Ministry of Environment to negotiate technical aspects of land use, forestry, and carbon markets in the negotiations. As she

describes it, she was woefully unequipped to deal with the political aspects of negotiations. When Andrea flew to her first COP in Nairobi in 2006, as one negotiator in a Colombian delegation that consisted of two people, she had not received any negotiations or UNFCCC-specific training. Her preparation consisted of reading a pirated version of Joyeeta Gupta's book "On Behalf of My Delegation"[x] on the plane to Nairobi. Once in Nairobi, she "started making a mess right away."[xi] Some missteps, like not knowing how to turn on the microphone, how to ask for the floor, or how to address the Chair of the meeting, were forgivable. Her proposal in a technical meeting for what she thought might be a slight edit to text, however, had wider consequences. Negotiators were outraged over her suggestion, and they immediately took the floor responding with harsh statements, exasperated over the "Colombian attempt to open up the Marrakesh Accords,[xii] which had taken years to negotiate." One staffer for the secretariat complained directly to the Colombian Foreign Ministry, which reprimanded Guerrero García. Christiana Figueres, observing these missteps, offered help; as did many other of her peers, especially other female Latin American delegates.

Andrea continued her on-the-job learning back home in Colombia's Ministry for the Environment and represented her country in many international negotiations. Given the high turnover rate, she took on many different roles linked to topics on mitigation, LULUCF (land use, land use change and forestry), carbon markets, and low carbon development. She started to build a strong reputation for her tireless work ethic and relentless pursuit in fighting for more than just environmental agreements. When Andrea would refuse to go to sleep and stay up until 4am negotiating and drafting new text, Andrea Alban, her superior at the time, would mock her, "Okay, Captain Planet. Go and try to save the world again."[xiii] Over time, Andrea's role changed: At the 2007 COP13 in Bali, Andrea was technical: in her own words, she "had no idea what was going on politically" and "was in small rooms staying up for 36 hours negotiating a semicolon." By COP14 in Poland, she was making more political points and by COP15 in Copenhagen she was leading Colombia's efforts on the entire issue of mitigation.

The Minister of Environment and the Head of Delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who was leading the issues of finance and adaptation, deeply trusted Andrea on mitigation issues and gave her free reign. As Andrea recalls: "We had a great relationship. She did finance and adaptation and she let me do everything on mitigation. Normally the foreign ministry wouldn't allow someone like me to be as blunt as I was. But I had her trust and people really respected her. That is when people started recognizing me. The Minister gave me cover, which allowed me to do things that others could not. That is when I started to get pulled into the broader political discussions." With the protection of her minister Andrea could be, and had become known as, a "straight-talker" that wouldn't cloud interventions in political bravado. As someone less constrained by the rigid rules of diplomatic etiquette and less concerned about upholding historic alliances than others, Andrea was more active in forging relationships across divides as they made sense for the issue at hand. People took notice because she was different. Andrea's colleagues and counterparts remember her as "ambitious for a good outcome. She was energetic, dynamic, she cared. She had integrity and could be trusted."[xiv] By the time Andrea got to Copenhagen, she had successes under her belt of introducing new text in negotiations that had been riddled with gridlock for years and had built a reputation as a frank and relentless negotiator with integrity and deep technical knowledge.

Getting buy-in

When Pete and Robert contacted Andrea to discuss how to take forward the small-group discussions in Copenhagen, they laid out their thinking: Pete and Robert wanted to explore with Andrea how they could continue productive discussions and wanted to convene a follow-up meeting to launch a new discussion format. Their respective ministers had, however, denied their request to host a meeting in the UK or Australia. Pete and Robert had considered who else could convene and Andrea's name came out at the top of the list. As Andrea remembers, Pete and Robert asked if she would take the mantle to convene this "little group of people who are willing to work together."[xv]

The core idea of "taking this format forward" was based on the impressions of the small room discussions at COP15 when a handful of delegates had gotten together to explore common ground across the North–South divide over divisive issues. The group had initially convened due to shared "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"[xvi] and because politics on each side had made it hard for those subgroups to connect with each other in other settings. The discussions revealed much more, namely that there were more aligned interests than previously presumed and that work towards solutions became possible once the delegates shared more openly with each other. They had created a space to speak frankly with one another, person-to-person, rather than delegate-to-delegate. In doing so, people had more honest conversations than the typical cacophony of reiterated national red lines, as was custom in plenaries. Within only a few hours of discussing they had identified several substantive compromise proposals on issues that had been gridlocked, such as differentiation, the legal nature of a follow-up agreement, the establishment of a 2-degree target, and others.

It seemed to all three of them that such a form of dialogue was ever more important now that disillusionment and lack of faith in international institutions and practices had taken hold. They were united in a shared philosophy that the multilateral processes must be maintained and even strengthened for any real progress to be made on climate change. And they were convinced that, with the right people, they could create a format that would do so.

Initially, Andrea was far from optimistic that she would get approval to host a meeting like the one Pete and Robert were proposing. It felt like "breaking some unspoken rules of G77."[xvii] And in the context of the "us versus them" mentality that many felt, Andrea, as a representative for a developing country, could be accused of siding with "the North." Indeed, Pete and Robert had already worked behind the scenes during Copenhagen to limit participation of European countries, many of which had wanted to join, precisely with an eye on ensuring that the format provides an equal footing.[xviii] Pete and Robert had to tell important developed-country negotiators that they would not be able to join.

The three of them agreed quickly that a first inaugural meeting would need to take place at the ministerial level. Such a mandate from the highest level was needed to convene any international format that brings together negotiators across traditional alliances. Negotiators needed this protection, they thought. As a negotiating block and UN coalition, the G77+China has foreign policy importance beyond the field of climate; promoting the collective interests of its countries across all UN issue areas. The Colombian Foreign Minister would therefore need to sanction such a new format given the possible far-reaching foreign policy implications of creating a format that might be perceived as deviating from

G77+China lines and breaking with G77+China customs. In addition, taking this format forward would require regular meetings and, as Andrea noted, the mere operational question of being allowed to attend such meetings would require a ministerial backing that these meetings are in fact, important. Andrea imagined a ministerial blessing for convening a first ministerial meeting to be extremely unlikely.

But Andrea was enticed by the idea of continuing the fruitful discussions and, as it turned out, she had fate on her side or, rather, "an alignment of stars," as she recalls. Somehow all things fit together:

First, Andrea had assumed substantial responsibilities for the Ministry of Environment giving her more authority. Second, her Minister, who was very interested in climate and the negotiations, continued to provide Andrea with significant autonomy. Third, the context provided some cover. This was a time of broader change in the international climate space with new interest-configurations materializing, new groups forming and new divides opening up. Forming a new discussion format could be done without raising too many eyebrows as many countries were questioning their approach to climate negotiations. Fourth and most importantly, the Foreign Minister of Colombia was new and to Andrea's surprise was okay to let the Minister of Environment lead on climate negotiations.

So, Andrea decided to try. She cleared the idea of having a ministerial meeting for a new format with the Minister of Environment, who then cleared it with his colleague the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In relatively little time, Andrea was able to report back to Robert and Pete that she would in fact be able to host a first meeting with the support of her Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In the weeks following COP15, Pete, Robert, and Andrea met via teleconference to discuss next steps and plan a first meeting in Cartagena, Colombia.

Working Towards a First Meeting

While Andrea had the support of her Minister to convene, everything other than the fact that a meeting was about to take place was up in the air.

The group of negotiators plotting around this idea, which at this point included several other people from the Copenhagen room, such as colleagues from Sweden, Mexico, Barbados, and several others all of whom joined together to think through these issues, had a shared interests to provide a vehicle for conversations that cuts across dividing lines; for parties to be able to discuss freely and openly; to work towards the most ambitious climate policies and international agreements possible. They were united around an idea that an ambitious climate regime would need to be predicated on the building blocks of:

1) A legally binding international agreement, and
2) Working towards a system where all major emitters are called to reduce their emissions in line with 2 degrees maximum temperature increase, without a "firewall" between developed and developing countries that leaves it open to some large emitters to cut their emissions.

They did not know to operationalize this plan though. As Andrea recalls, "there was no blueprint" for a group like this. In Copenhagen, the meetings were centered on relationship networks and aligned interests. Pete and Robert had reached out to colleagues with whom they had good working relationships and that they knew would be constructive from countries that broadly could support the priorities noted above. However, several new questions needed to be answered:

- Should they maintain this approach going forward?
- Or should they be more deliberate in considering who to invite? If so, how? Should they even invite people from countries that do not fully support the key objectives?
- How large should the group become?
- Should it become a formal negotiating group with agreed positions or should they keep it informal?

Related questions concerned the permanence of membership:

- Should selected countries officially join the "Dialogue" and become permanent members? If so, how should one become a member? If not, under what conditions should parties be invited or uninvited?

The trio had agreed that ministerial backing was necessary since negotiators could get in trouble for their unsupported participation in such formats—as Andrea puts it: "I couldn't be perceived as 'a technical person making international alliances.'"[xix] Questions remained, however, concerning the level at which such meetings should take place as well as the level of formality for future meetings.

- At what level should the group meet going forward after the first ministerial meeting? Should it be technical negotiators? Or should it be Heads of Delegation? Or should it be at the ministerial level?
- Should meetings work towards joint statements by countries/country negotiators or some other dedicated formal outcome? If not, what should they work towards?

Another set of questions revolved around the expectations and norms under which the group should convene, if it did, to ensure the same intimate level of discussion.

- What rules, norms, and expectations should be set for the meetings? How should these be enforced?

Lastly, and crucially important for the upcoming ministerial meeting:

- What should the ministers agree on? What form should that agreement take?
- What mandate would the ministers need to pass on to technical negotiators?
- How public and official should that meeting be?

Discussion

Imagine you are working in Andrea's team, and she fully explained the entire background to you. She is about to meet with Robert and Pete. What is your advice to her on these questions?

Remember: Their goal is to create a new discussion format that enables productive and open discussions across traditional divides in the context of such a format potentially being perceived as threatening by others. The goal of these discussions is ultimately to translate the proposals they come

up with into the formal multilateral climate regime and to affect the actual legal text of future multilateral negotiations.

Endnotes

[i] 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), 92.

[ii] Anonymous interview participant.

[iii] Joshua Watts and Joanna Depledge, "Latin America in the Climate Change Negotiations: Exploring the AILAC and ALBA Coalitions," WIREs Climate Change 9, no. 6 (2018): e533, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.533.

[iv] Anonymous interview participant.

[v] In a discussion about working methods and the mandate for the Chair to prepare a new draft negotiating text for the upcoming COP.

[vi] iisd Reporting Service, "AWGs FINAL," Earth Negotiations Bulletin 12, no. 460 (April 14, 2010): 7, http://enb.iisd.org/download/pdf/enb12460e.pdf.

[vii] iisd Reporting Service, 8.

[viii] Willis, 2010 cited in Blaxekjær et al., 91.

[ix] Interview with Kaveh Guilanpour.

[x] Joyeeta Gupta and Jennifer Allan, *On Behalf of My Delegation, ...: A Survival Guide for Developing Country Climate Negotiators*, 2nd ed. (Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada: International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2023).

[xi] Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

[xii] A set of agreements reached at the 7th Conference of the Parties (COP7) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in 2001, on the rules of meeting the targets set out in the Kyoto Protocol. The separate Marrakech Declaration of 15 April 1994, manifesting the Uruguay Round trade agreements and establishing the World Trade Organization, was also concluded and signed in Marrakech, Morocco.

[xiii] Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

[xiv] Interview with Kaveh Guilanpour.

[xv] Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

[xvi] Pete Betts, unpublished manuscript.

[xvii] Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

[xviii] Anonymous interview participant.

[xix] Interview with Andrea Guerrero Garcia.

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