

## Assessing the Impacts of National Climate Self-Differentiation on Climate Governance

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*Please note that in lieu of a full paper, this document is intended to serve as a brief introduction to upcoming research, to be further previewed and discussed at the May 12-13 2017 Interconnections Conference in Bonn, Germany. Please email Meg Boyle at [mmb5966@psu.edu](mailto:mmb5966@psu.edu) for more details regarding the research design and opportunities to engage, or to note possible gaps, suggested references, areas of shared inquiry, and/or possible collaborations.*

The Paris Agreement, a 2015 international climate accord under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has upended long-held understandings of international climate governance by allowing national governments broad leeway to design their own climate commitments. The Paris Agreement's bottom-up legal architecture is largely unprecedented in the conventions of international law (Werksman, 2016). In theory, each country's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) is informed by its perception of its domestic development circumstances, rather than by lists of developed and developing countries delineated in economic terms and decided under an international regime (Mbeva & Pauw, 2016).

While arguably crafted specifically to overcome historical political divides, avoid perceived risks to national sovereignty, and incent broad participation in a new international climate agreement (US, 2013), self-differentiation may have farther-reaching and material consequences for international cooperation, climate governance, and sustainable development across scales. After leading the Paris Agreement process, for instance, outgoing UNFCCC Executive Secretary Christiana Figueres ran for UN Secretary General, partially in hopes of spreading models of cooperation similar to the Paris Agreement to other areas of international governance (Figueres, 2016). The government of Brazil spoke less optimistically about self-differentiation's broader promise, claiming particularly strongly at the 2014 climate negotiations that *"the notion of self-differentiation is tantamount to annihilation of the UNFCCC. It will promote backtracking, dwindling ambition and ultimately the perception of an unjust regime where Parties are encouraged to pursue a less is more approach (TWN, 2014)."*

Several questions about the significance of self-differentiation now face climate policy scholars and practitioners: Does UNFCCC self-differentiation serve as a model for governance in other forums, or on other issues? Do countries cleave closely to the language of traditional economic development paradigms under self-differentiation (Mbeva & Pauw, 2016), or do they reflect alternate sustainable development pathways in their NDCs? Does self-differentiation affect cohesion in countries' domestic implementation/dual implementation of NDCs and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Are communities' interests, initiatives, and specific subnational vulnerabilities more or less represented in nationally self-differentiated regimes? How might self-differentiation obscure or re-entrench existing power dynamics in climate negotiations?

Already, work by practitioners and scholars speaks to the Paris Agreement's effects on South-South Climate Cooperation (South Centre, 2016), the links between the SDGs and the UNFCCC (Northrop et al., 2016), the formation of country coalitions in international climate governance (Hirsch, 2016), the extent to which international climate finance reaches its intended recipients and addresses local vulnerabilities (IIED, n.d.), and trends in climate action by subnational and non-state actors (Chan et al., 2016). Self-differentiation has also received some attention, particularly in law and policy journals which can publish quickly (see, for instance, Deleuil & Honken, 2015; Rajamani, 2016; and Winkler & Rajamani, 2014). However, multi-scalar and cross-fora analyses of the spread and significance of self-differentiation continue to represent urgent gaps in interdisciplinary research.

At the 2017 Interconnections Conference, this discussion will preview a two-year research plan designed to help evaluate self-differentiation's significance within and across scales of climate governance. Within a more narrowly crafted set of questions, the research will contribute to efforts to assess self-differentiation's effects on power dynamics, alliance formation, and priority-setting within the UNFCCC, to understand the extent to which self-differentiation will affect international climate governance in other forums, and importantly, to consider what implications it will have, if any, for subnational and non-state actors.

More specifically, through textual analysis, the research will look at how self-differentiation affects references to vulnerability and development status in national positions in the SDGs, UNFCCC, and Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF). Through interviews and surveys of climate negotiators, it will also explore how countries work together on shared vulnerabilities and sustainable development priorities in a self-differentiated regime. Through participant observation, document analysis, and surveys and interviews within national and municipal government representatives, local organizations, and community members, the research will then look at self-differentiation's effects on governance relationships across scales. Specifically, the research will consider how self-differentiation affects the inclusion and representation of subnational and community interests, initiatives, and vulnerabilities in international climate discussions.

In addition to contributing to a multi-scalar analysis of self-differentiation, the proposed research will make an important theoretical contribution in analyzing membership in alliances like the Climate Vulnerable Forum and the High Ambition Coalition as one mode of national climate self-differentiation, albeit of a different historical origin and legal character than submitting an NDC.

The research design is informed by ongoing conversations and is intended to be timely and relevant for a range of civil society stakeholders, government actors, institutions, and researchers. Findings will be made available to the public and via roundtables in 2019.

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