

# It's a Performance, Not an Orchestra! Rethinking Soft Coordination in Global Climate Governance

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## Abstract

Global climate governance is in transition. As the focus shifts from negotiations to implementation, the quest for ways to effectively coordinate ambitious climate action has become a key concern. While existing studies frame this problem mostly in terms of institutional design (to “facilitate” state ambition) and strategic delegation of authority (to “orchestrate” nonstate action), this article builds on dramaturgical policy analysis to examine soft coordination in practice. Using ethnographic methods, we analyze public performances at the twenty-fifth Conference of the Parties (COP25) in Madrid. We find that these were shaped by preestablished governance scripts and social roles available to participants, but also by creative improvisations and interventions. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat and COP Presidency intervened to configure the physical setting of the conference, mold its narrative arch, and shape available roles. We conclude that performances and dramaturgical interventions are important tools of soft coordination in global climate governance. Their analysis constitutes a productive entry point for grasping contemporary transformations in global politics.

The opening ceremony on December 2, 2019, set the tone for the United Nations' twenty-fifth Conference of the Parties (COP25) in Madrid. While the conference's official aim was to finalize the Paris Agreement's governance framework, it also represented an occasion to build momentum ahead of the scheduled resubmission of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) in 2020. Politicians and celebrities, among them the presidents of Chile and Spain, musician Alejandro Sanz, and UN secretary-general António Guterres, addressed the audience of delegates and observers with emotional speeches expressing

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indignation and moral outrage but also outlining reasons for hope and signs of progress.

To international relations scholars trained in the analysis of formal institutions and the sober play of state interests, such public happenings might appear anecdotal and ultimately irrelevant for serious analysis. After all, a common understanding in the field holds that international regimes coordinate collective action through common “principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures” (Krasner 1983, 2)—not through drama and performance. However, global governance has undergone major changes over the last decades. In many areas, hard regulation through legal rules gave way to soft governance modes (Abbott and Snidal 2000), which operate through global goals (Biermann et al. 2017), transparency mechanisms (Gupta et al. 2020), the provision of incentives (Abbott 2018) expert knowledge (Mitchell et al. 2006), and the emission of signals and discourses for global audiences (Death 2011). Rather than directly prescribing a certain conduct, these new forms of authority target addressees’ beliefs and expectations (Krisch 2017).

In the international climate change regime, the Paris Agreement adopted in 2015 marks such a transition (Aykut et al. 2021). Climate governance moved from a “regulatory” approach with binding reduction commitments for states to a “catalytic and facilitative model” (Hale 2016) that combines two strategies of soft coordination: first, an ambition mechanism aimed at aligning national climate policies through a system of common objectives, NDCs, and public review and resubmission cycles, and second, measures to orchestrate private and subnational climate action, for instance, through the Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action and the Global Climate Action Portal (NAZCA). This shift from hard to soft modes of coordination has sparked debates about its effects and conditions of effectiveness. These usually address soft coordination from legal or institutionalist perspectives, for instance, by examining relations of delegation between central and subordinate governance bodies (Abbott 2018) or by defining ideal-typical governance functions (Oberthür et al. 2020). However, this disconnects analyses of soft coordination from the social agents that populate global climate governance and give life to its mechanisms. As a result, statements on the effectiveness of the Paris framework often rely more on theoretical assumptions than on empirical observation. This applies to the capacity of the agreement’s ambition mechanism to build trust and exert pressure (Gupta and van Asselt 2019). It also applies to the question “whether and for how long the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)—the Conference of the Parties (COP) or the Secretariat—has been an orchestrator” and, if so, “through precisely what causal mechanisms” they have exerted influence (van Asselt and Zelli 2018, 36).

This article proposes a change in perspective. Instead of formal relations of authority or governance functions, we place the focus on social interactions at UN climate conferences to examine soft coordination *in practice*. Who

initiates coordination attempts and where? How, through which practices and mechanisms, does soft coordination unfold? Importantly, interactions at climate conferences take place in a highly mediatized environment and entail public performances of transparency, disclosure, and review (Kinchy and Schaffer 2018). To capture these symbolic dimensions, we use “dramaturgical policy analysis”—an approach that examines how discursive and dramaturgical interventions shape public performances of authority (Edelman 1964; Hajer 2009). Contrarily to studies that operate a clear distinction between “performative” and “substantive” politics (e.g., Ding 2020), such a perspective assumes that performances are neither secondary nor a distraction but core governance features.

Empirically, the article analyzes COP25 in Madrid in December 2019. It combines ethnographic observation, background interviews, document analysis, and systematic coding of standardized observation notes to identify patterns of influence and agency in soft coordination. The qualitative research design sheds light on both direct and indirect, noncodified sources of influence, which rest on the day-to-day work of implementing governance mechanisms, circulating communicative frames, and shaping global norms.

## A Dramaturgical Approach to Soft Coordination

One of the most pressing questions in climate governance scholarship is whether and how a governance architecture based on self-determined pledges and transparent reporting of state and nonstate agents can achieve climate goals. Orchestration is often seen as an analytic lens to answer this question (Abbott 2018; Hale and Roger 2014). It refers to an “indirect mode of governance that relies on soft inducements,” such as the provision of incentives, as well as on the creation of intermediaries (Abbott 2018, 189). The metaphor also points to a central conductor or principal, who coordinates other agents’ behavior. But is this the right metaphor? In other regulatory fields, orchestration usually refers to direct, hierarchical modes of intervention. However, direct control is rare in global governance. Moreover, there frequently is not one but several potential conductors. Reflecting on the Sustainable Development Goals, Biermann and colleagues (2017, 29) therefore suggest that “a better description for governance through goals might even be conductorless jazz.” Of course, even conductorless jazz follows rules imposed by harmonies and progressions, standards that provide structure, roles attached to instruments, and expectations of different audiences. But the plea for a metaphor and analytical lens that pay more attention to practice, performance, and distributed forms of agency is spot-on. With this in mind, the section reviews the existing climate governance literature on soft coordination along three guiding questions: Who coordinates (*agents*)? Where does coordination take place (*sites*)? and How does it unfold (*mechanisms*)?

*Who? Widening the Focus to Treaty Secretariats and Nonstate Agents*

Formally, the supreme governing body in the international climate regime is the COP. Two other main bodies treat issues related to the Kyoto Protocol: the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and the Paris Agreement (Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement [CMA]), while more specific questions are delegated to subsidiary bodies (the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice [SBSTA], Subsidiary Body for Implementation [SBI], and ad-hoc groups). In all of these, state delegates decide by consensus. This state-centric and hierarchical organization contrasts with the polycentric nature (Jordan et al. 2018) and multiagent network structure (Saerbeck et al. 2020) of contemporary climate governance. Of course, this is not entirely new. There is a long history of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) shaping global environmental governance by providing technical expertise, raising public attention, and building transnational networks (Betsill and Corell 2008). But the Paris regime takes this one step further by encouraging private and subnational entities to contribute directly to reducing emissions (Hale 2016) and NGOs and think tanks to support the process by scrutinizing country submissions, tracking implementation, and exerting pressure on laggards (van Asselt 2016).

Another type of governance agent that has attracted scholarly attention recently comprises international bureaucracies, which are found to exert different forms of influence in different phases of the policy process (Biermann et al. 2009). Treaty secretariats in particular organize state relations, frame issues, and manage institutional overlaps, especially when state preferences have not yet solidified (Jinnah 2014). The UNFCCC Secretariat (hereinafter the Secretariat) is a good example. Despite a “prohibitively strict mandate as a technocratic facilitator,” it adopted a proactive “entrepreneurial” role in Copenhagen in 2009, and then again a decade later, after US president Trump’s announcement to withdraw from the Paris Agreement, when it acted as a “knowledge broker” and “communication hub” for stakeholders to ensure the continued centrality of the UN process (Well et al. 2020). This and other studies show that only a practice-based perspective interested in “what international bureaucracies [and other governance agents] ‘do,’ rather than what they ‘are’” (Littoz-Monnet 2020) allows for full capture of the new complexity of a polycentric climate governance regime, in which a variety of agents participate in implementing governance goals but also in shaping the new regime. This means widening the focus from the formal authority of the COP and relations of delegation to distributed forms of agency and practices of (soft) coordination.

*Where? Global Climate Conferences as Sites of Coordination*

Over the last decade, climate governance scholars have grown an interest in “the ability of the UNFCCC to bring together different actors across time and space”

and in global summitry as a “facilitative practice that holds the polycentric regime complex together” (Löwbrand et al. 2017, 580). This builds on critical governance literature traditions, which have analyzed the symbolic and performative dimensions of UN conferences as transnational mega-events (Aykut et al. 2017; Campbell et al. 2014; Little 1995). Paul Little’s (1995) account of the 1992 Rio conference, for instance, identifies the endless litany of speeches by heads of state and government during the opening ceremony as a series of performances directed at their respective home audiences. Carl Death (2011, 9–10) identifies the 2002 Johannesburg and 2009 Copenhagen conferences as attempts “to inspire and conduct the self-optimization of the watching global audience” and as a “distinct technology of government” in which symbolic aspects are not sideshows but core governance instruments.

For these authors, global mega-conferences transcend formal negotiations; they are also important loci for the production of meaning, new discourses, and policy frames. This perspective allows for analysis of recently growing expectations for climate conferences to support the “momentum” of public and private climate action by staging success stories and positive narratives (Chan and Pauw 2014) and by signaling commitment to policy makers and investors (Biniiaz 2020). COPs are thereby understood as transnational mega-events combining different social spaces that spread out concentrically across the host city (Dahan et al. 2009). These include a negotiation space with access limited to negotiators and some observers; a trade fair of ideas and climate solutions within the so-called Blue Zone, which is open to a larger public of accredited global experts, NGOs, media, and businesses; and a popular happening, with self-organized meetings, cultural events, and demonstrations in public spaces.

### *How? Global Governance as Drama and Performance*

Soft governance works by aligning expectations, creating trust, and altering preferences (Bang et al. 2016). However, as discussed earlier, legal and institutional analyses often lack the analytical tools to examine these elements. Network analyses provide a useful complement in highlighting informal relations and information flows (Saerbeck et al. 2020). But they, too, are less helpful for understanding the role of symbols, discourses, affects, or sentiments in international communication. Governance bodies frequently use “visual, verbal, and gestural symbols to foster an impression of good governance” (Ding 2020) or resort to emotional messaging, alternating “positive” self-praise with “negative” messaging focused on threats and dangers (Patz et al. 2021). To capture these communicative and affective dimensions, we draw on Marteen Hajer’s (2009) dramaturgical perspective on politics. This places the focus not only “on what people say” but also on “how they say it, where they say it, and to whom they say it” (Hajer 2009, 65). Hajer introduces four basic analytical categories: staging, scripting, setting, and performance. In Table 1, we adapt his definitions to foster an analytical tool kit for the observation of global climate governance.

**Table 1**  
Dramaturgical Practices at UN Climate Conferences

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Scripting	The <i>script</i> defines the general character of a UN conference: its purpose, sequence of events, and narrative arc. It also comprises implicit rules of behavior along with more specific instructions laid out in treaties, decisions, and rules of procedure. <i>Scripting</i> denotes attempts to operationalize existing rules or introduce new ones or to shape the overall narrative of a conference. This includes shaping expectations for appropriate behavior and determining the set of <i>roles</i> that are available to participants in a given setting ( <i>role provision</i> ). <i>Counterscripting</i> challenges prevalent scripts by questioning existing rules or recasting roles.
Setting	<i>Setting</i> denotes the provision and design of stage(s) where performances take place, their spatial distribution across a conference space, and the equipment of performances with accessories, artifacts, and symbols that interpret the script.
Staging	<i>Staging</i> refers to the overall organization of interactions and performances in a multilateral setting. It entails selecting and applying a script; interpreting it by establishing links to existing and/or new symbols and characters; and providing material, symbolic, or reputational incentives for agents to engage in dramaturgical practices. Staging establishes a distinction between actors and audience(s). By extension, it therefore also includes interventions aimed at bringing other agents virtually “onstage” by referring to them, quoting them, highlighting their achievements, or voicing their concerns.
Performing	<i>Performances</i> are public interactions during a conference that enact a script and produce social realities. Actors thereby engage in technical debates or emotional statements within given settings, embody preset roles ( <i>role taking</i> ) or reshape them ( <i>role making</i> ), and creatively interpret and improvise on scripts.

Adapted from Hajer (2009).

The dramaturgical perspective builds on a sociological understanding of human interactions as a series of staged “scenes” in which individuals act (or *perform*) in a specific social context (*setting*), according to implicit and explicit rules of behavior (*scripts*) and bundles of expectations (*roles*) (Goffman 1959). Agents onstage—*actors*<sup>1</sup>—follow scripted roles and instructions but also creatively interpret and reshape these. Shifting analytical attention from formal rules and functions to staged performances permits examining soft coordination

1. We speak of *actors* in this article when individual agents perform a role or embody a character onstage.

through the design of material settings, the scripting or sequencing of events, and the provision of roles for conference participants. Seen through this lens, global climate governance appears as an always temporary, more or less stable convergence of expectations about scripts and roles, shaped not only by treaties and legal documents but also by dramaturgical interventions of different agents and creative performances before varying audiences.

## A Bottom-Up Perspective on a Bottom-Up Regime

Our collective research included a series of preparatory and follow-up meetings and a two-week “collaborative event ethnography” (Aykut et al. 2017; Campbell et al. 2014) at COP25. We used standardized observation templates, data-sharing routines, and regular exchanges of experiences to produce 110 observation notes (see Annex 2 for a sample). These cover negotiation sessions accessible to observers, plenary sessions of COP bodies, high-level and Presidency events, and side events. Although these formats have different purposes, all of them take place before an audience and hence include a performative dimension. In this section, we examine first the overall *script* of COP25 and then its spatial, material, and organizational *setting*. Performances are analyzed in the next section.

### *The Script: A Transition from Negotiations to Implementation*

On paper, COP25 was only intended to be a “transition COP” to finalize the post-Paris architecture. This included operationalizing the carbon markets mentioned in Article 6 of the agreement and finalizing the reporting and assessment framework of its “ambition mechanism.” The latter combines a continuous assessment process—the “enhanced transparency framework”—that progressively supersedes existing assessments under the Convention and a collective review or “global stocktake” every five years. In Madrid, negotiations on transparency covered topics like “structured summaries” for biennial transparency reports, “common reporting tables” for greenhouse gas inventories, and “common tabular formats” for reporting progress on implementation. Success in these negotiations was considered vital to start the upcoming review cycle in time, as a first round of assessments under the new framework was scheduled for 2022, followed by the global stocktake a year later and new NDC submissions in 2025.

But communication by the Chilean Presidency also framed the conference as an occasion to build momentum for new country pledges and increased participation of nonstate agents. This corresponds to a shift in focus from the COP as a negotiation body to the larger conference space as an arena to facilitate global climate action (Kinley 2017). As transnational mega-events, UN climate conferences provide a forum and site of convergence for diverse agents and a focal point for climate-related communication. In this facilitative practice, the

rotating COP Presidency and Secretariat are key. Together, they determine the spatial and visual organization of the venue and the sequence of side events accompanying the negotiations. The Secretariat controls the formalities of access and accreditation of organizations, provides information, and assists the negotiations (Saerbeck et al. 2020). The Presidency has a more explicit agenda-setting function, branding an overall theme—for COP25, *Blue COP*—and organizing Presidency events (UNFCCC Secretariat 2020).

### *The Setting: A Mega-event Designed as a Signal for Global Audiences*

COP25 took place under the shadow of an increasingly polarized global political situation and intensifying conflicts over climate and energy. The year 2019 had seen an unprecedented global youth mobilization for climate action but also a wave of protests against social and economic inequalities, which put the theme of a “just transition” at the heart of debates. Political turmoil also ushered the relocation of COP25 from Brazil to Santiago de Chile (after Jair Bolsonaro retracted Brazil’s commitment), and then to Madrid (when social unrest erupted in Chile). This broader context shaped performances within the conference space in terms of participants, themes, and frames, as well as outside, for instance, at the climate march organized midway through the conference.

Despite the very short planning time due to the last-minute move from Chile to Spain, the design of the venue reflected both this broader context and the new expectations placed on the UNFCCC process. The Chilean Presidency framed COP25 as a critical moment to address the climate emergency. Its communication strategy used illustrative symbols like a dissolving clock and a strong urgency frame, underpinned by references to scientific facts. In the corridors leading from the Feria de Madrid metro station to the conference building, large billboards referenced projected warming impacts, such as an estimate of 143 million climate-related migrants by 2050. In the conference’s corridors, halls, and pavilions, calls for “climate action” or to “act now” were ubiquitous, echoing the official COP slogan #tiempodeactuar (time for action). While emergency frames have a long history in climate debates, this official urgency branding appears as a specific feature of COP25.

Another striking element of the venue was the so-called Climate Action Hub. The central location of this space, situated right after the entry and credential check, its name, and its design—a half-open space reminiscent of an ancient amphitheater—stood symbolically for the will to reach beyond governments and directly address wider (global) society. To reach the negotiation rooms situated on the other end of the vast conference complex, delegates had to pass through long hallways with civil society booths and national pavilions. They could thus get a sense of a global society in action. Some of these arrangements may reflect material limitations imposed by the venue. But a similar spatial organization at COP26 in Glasgow a year later, including an immense Climate



Action Zone in the form of a sports arena, suggests that the design was not coincidental. Both the script and the setting at COP25 hence prepared the stage for performances centered on creating transparency, conveying a sense of urgency and activating the potential of global climate action.

## Time for Action! Decoding the COP Climate Theater

Speeches and public performances at COP25 crystallized around recurring patterns of interaction that can be schematized into a set of social roles. To illustrate these, consider the following quotes from UN secretary-general António Guterres' speech at the Global Climate Action event on December 11, before a packed and cheerful audience:

The scientific evidence presented in recent weeks has only heightened the urgency. The world is getting hotter and more dangerous faster than we ever thought possible. Irreversible tipping points are within sight and hurtling towards us. As the logo for COP25 suggests, it is five minutes to midnight in the global climate emergency.

Guterres then recalled the UN Climate Action Summit in September 2019:

Today, I'm pleased to release my report from the summit. It is already available in the UN website and the UNFCCC website. It captures what the summit delivered.... We're still a long way from our objective of a carbon neutral world by 2050.

He closed his remarks on a positive note:

I'm delighted to see that momentum continues to grow as we are seeing it today here. Led by Chile, the Climate Ambition Alliance was launched at the Climate Action Summit in New York. Seventy countries signed up along with 100 major cities, they were joined by businesses worth combined \$2.3 trillion and the investors managing over \$2 trillion.... In short, the summit provided the global stage to show who is stepping up.

The quotes exhibit a typical narrative arc for speeches at COP25. The first paints an alarming picture of the climate emergency. The second highlights efforts to gather and assess data on climate policy. The third depicts growing momentum for climate action in society. From a dramaturgical perspective, the quotes point to distinct social roles that Guterres embodied during his talk. These three roles also structured other public performances at the conference.

### *A Tale of Accountants, Admonishers, and Animators*

We first identified these roles in the course of an exploratory, inductive screening and discussion of our observation notes. Further analysis then helped to describe them in more detail and track their occurrence across different

settings.<sup>2</sup> *Accountants* scrutinized country submissions in official assessment formats, discussed reporting requirements and review methods in the negotiations, and presented new data-generation methods in side events. This role was mostly enacted by state delegates and representatives from NGOs and think tanks. The two additional roles used a more emotional register to disseminate contrasting images of possible futures. *Admonishers* warned of the consequences of runaway warming and stressed the urgency to act by referring to scientific assessments or climate-related catastrophes. This role was embodied by scientists and activists, the COP Presidency, public figures, and senior government representatives. *Animators*, by contrast, engaged in positive storytelling and motivational speeches, highlighting success stories and best practices. They conveyed the impression that the low-carbon transformation is already unfolding. This role was frequently enacted by representatives from firms, cities, and consultancies but also senior UN personnel. As in the preceding example, actors would often switch from one role to another during a speech, adding to the dramatic intensity of their performances.

To understand how these roles shaped the conference's dramaturgy, we analyzed quantitatively where and in what circumstances they appeared. We constituted a subcorpus of fifty-two observation reports covering the negotiations (seventeen, including six plenary sessions), high-level and Presidency events (fourteen), and side events (twenty-one).<sup>3</sup> Plenary negotiation sessions serve to take stock of progress made in smaller informal meetings and to adopt decisions. High-level and Presidency events do not take decisions. Typically less formal, they target a larger audience. Side events provide a platform for observer organizations highlighting diverse issues. Using MAXQDA software, we applied five codes to this subcorpus. We coded the appearance of the three roles before examining where they coincided with practices of *scripting* and *staging*.<sup>4</sup> Although the quantified data must be interpreted with some care, they provide instructive insights into patterns of performances at COP25 that complement the qualitative analysis.

Table 2 shows which roles were prevalent in which event types. We find that negotiations mainly provided a stage for accountants. By contrast, side events staged all three roles, with many instances of animating talk, but also accounting and admonishing performances involving NGOs and think tanks. High-level and Presidency events frequently featured prominent figures embodying admonisher and animator roles. This points to a greater dramatic intensity, or theatricality, of these stages.

2. We examine the three roles in more detail in Aykut et al. (2020).

3. This sample was selected with a focus on mitigation-related issues and Blue Zone events. Following the official program, six Marrakesh Partnership events organized in the Action Hub were grouped as side events. Two others, organized respectively as high-level and Presidency events, fall into these categories. Annex 1 provides a full list.

4. Annex 3 contains details on codes, keywords, and the coding process.

**Table 2**  
Distribution of Roles Across Event Types

Stage	No. Coded Segments		
	Admonisher	Accountant	Animator
Side events <sup>a</sup>	63	81	152
High-level and Presidency events <sup>b</sup>	199	96	167
Negotiations and plenary events <sup>c</sup>	24	135	27

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 21.

<sup>b</sup>*n* = 17.

<sup>c</sup>*n* = 14.

Table 3 shows where practices of scripting and staging coincided with one of the roles (additional information in Annex 3). Negotiations were key sites for scripting the accountant role, reflecting the official aim at COP25 to complete the Paris rulebook. Delegates often expressed diverging views on the format of public reporting and the practical organization of assessment exercises. During the first week of informal negotiations on common tabular formats for country reports for example,<sup>5</sup> the European Union, US, and Swiss delegates wanted to discuss common reporting tables, while the Chinese delegate argued that the structured summary “can have different formats, including tables, narratives, graphs.” This seemingly technical question will shape the practice of future assessment exercises by determining how accounting performances will be equipped. The final COP decision, the so-called Chile Madrid Time for Action, provides another example for scripting. It “requests” the Secretariat to prepare a synthesis report on NDCs for COP26, hence assigning it an accountant role.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Table 3 also shows that side events, high-level events, and Presidency events were key venues for staging, in which animators and admonishers voiced the concerns and presented the achievements of a wider variety of agents.

We thus identify different spaces and logics underlying the construction and enactment of social roles at COPs. While the accountant role was explicitly scripted in negotiations among state delegates, the animator and admonisher roles were shaped largely in public performances staged in the wider COP arena.

### *Polycentricity as Performance*

A dramaturgical perspective also sheds new light on polycentricity in global climate governance. In a context where UN climate conferences have come to constitute performative events for global audiences (Aykut et al. 2021), staging

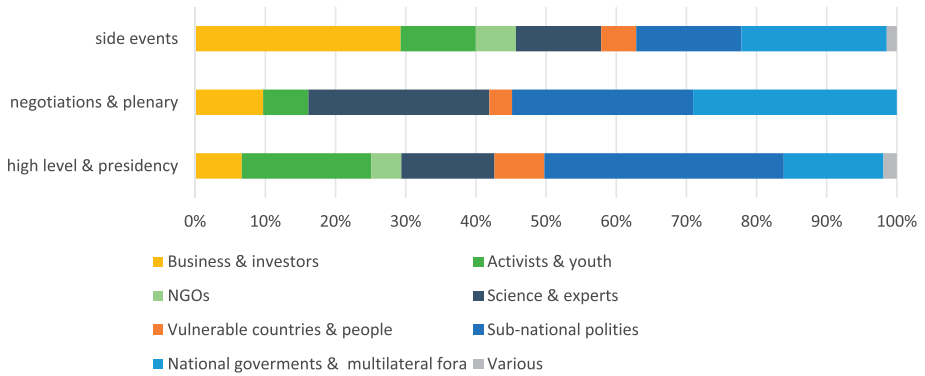
5. SBSTA informals on CTF tracking progress, December 5, 2019.

6. See Decision 1/CMA.2, para. 10, which builds on Paris decision 1/CP.21, para. 25 (2015).

**Table 3**  
Co-occurrence of Practices and Roles Across Event Types

<i>Role/Practice</i>	<i>Scripting</i>			<i>Staging</i>		
	<i>Accountant</i>	<i>Animator</i>	<i>Admonisher</i>	<i>Accountant</i>	<i>Animator</i>	<i>Admonisher</i>
Negotiations and plenary	92	7	7	10	14	7
High-level and Presidency events	44	39	34	23	101	78
Side events	42	57	13	21	84	27

Shaded cells indicate prevalent combinations of practices and roles in an event type. Cells shaded in dark gray indicate the main spaces where the social roles were scripted and staged. Cells shaded in light gray indicate secondary spaces where these practices occurred.



**Figure 1**  
Agents “Staged” Across Event Types


polycentricity becomes a key governance technique. Through their flesh-and-blood presence onstage or as reference points in public speeches, nonstate actors embody important elements of the new regime. Activists, experts, and scientists personify public scrutiny and social pressure. Businesses and subnational authorities represent momentum for climate action. In the post-Paris regime, COPs also gain legitimacy as *the* political space and moment where all these voices are heard, and global agendas seemingly align on their demands. To understand how this played out during COP25, we examined which types of agents were staged, that is, referred to in speeches at different events (Figure 1).

While negotiations only displayed sporadic instances of staging, mostly of scientists and subnational entities, a greater diversity of agents populated interventions in high-level, Presidency, and side events. There, admonishing interventions frequently cited vulnerable communities, scientists, and youth activists, whereas animating speeches often referred to bold climate action by businesses and investors, cities, and states. Overall, side events and high-level events involved the greatest diversity in terms of both speakers and agents mentioned in interventions. They also displayed the highest level of theatricality by combining high degrees of dramatic intensity, emotionality, and publicity. As an example, take this excerpt from a speech by entrepreneur and high-level champion for climate action Gonzalo Muñoz during the Energy Action Event:

We are suffering a crisis of empathy. We, people in this room, are not the ones that are suffering most of the real problems, daily basis.... The ones that have less possibility of adapting, the ones that are suffering on a daily basis, they are probably not very connected to the documents that have to be signed.... We have to be much more empathetic, and, as I said yesterday, it's not only about people; it's about many other species. And the message is that we have to love all children of all species for all times.<sup>7</sup>

7. COP25, “Climate-Proofing Global Energy Systems,” Global Climate Action event, December 7, 2019.

	Negotiations and plenary	Side events	High-level and Presidency events
<b>Main role</b>	Accountant	Animator	Admonisher & animator
<b>Main actors</b>	States	Mostly non-state actors	State & non-state actors
<b>Theatricality</b>	Low	Medium	High
<b>Polycentricity</b>	Low	High	High



**Figure 2**  
Characterizations of Different Settings at COP25

High-level and Presidency events hosted dramatic performances depicting the risks of runaway warming or summoning delegates to act. Interventions in these arenas, often by senior officials and public figures, fundamentally differed from interventions by state delegates in negotiations. The former seized the stage provided by the COP to perform before a global public, using emotional language and dramatic pictures to narrate encouraging success stories or invoke the struggle of vulnerable communities and demands of youth activists. The latter performed in technical accounting formats, used less emotional language, and frequently engaged in discussions over the script of future assessment exercises and appropriate behavior in these settings.

Figure 2 provides a synoptic presentation of our findings concerning the character of different settings at COP25. Our analysis indicates that different spaces and event formats at the Madrid conference appeared to afford specific types of acts, roles, and audiences. But in practice, performances were not only shaped by their setting; they also depended on actors' performing skills, on their interpretation of roles and scripts, and on the outcome of efforts to rescript aspects of a play. Accordingly, performances always combined elements of top-down guidance and bottom-up agency.

### **Dramaturgical Interventions as Mechanisms of Soft Coordination**

While important elements of the current governance transition are scripted in the Paris Agreement and subsequent COP decisions, the texts leave room for interpretation. Agents at COP25 used this room to creatively shape the new

regime. Earlier, we showed that this involved interpreting scripts and roles in public performances. Here we take a step back and identify three types of dramaturgical interventions that were frequent at COP25 and represented distinct strategies of soft coordination: *rehearsals* aimed at preparing state-led accounting exercises through training and equipment, *role provision* was used to shape expectations of appropriate behavior in public performances within the wider conference space, and *counterscripting* consisted of challenging aspects of the current governance approach throughout all event types and outside the conference halls.

### *Rehearsals: Preparing the Grand Accounting Theater*

The Paris ambition mechanism combines a continuous assessment process, regular moments of collective review, and the resubmission of country pledges. These upcoming reviews and assessments partly build on existing formats. Even where they do not explicitly do so, the path dependency of UN diplomacy means that they can be expected to largely emulate existing assessment practice. The Talanoa Dialogue organized between 2018 and 2019, for instance, was widely considered a test run for the first global stocktake. The “stocktake on pre-2020 implementation and ambition,” an additional format mandated at COP23 on the demand of developing countries, provided another illustration for current assessment practice. At COP25, it consisted of a “technical” and a “high-level” session.<sup>8</sup> The latter took the form of a panel discussion, with representatives from Rwanda, India, St. Lucia, Finland, and France presenting their climate policies, implementation progress, and expected financial support. Even though a recurring mantra in speeches at COP25 was that “the world is watching,” the session only attracted limited public attention. It was conducted in a technocratic accounting style, with varying degrees of detail and types of information presented. Delegates frequently criticized unspecified ambition gaps without blaming individual countries. Rather than offering moments of critical scrutiny and peer control, the exercise thus constituted an occasion for self-staging and displays of punctual successes.

The Talanoa Dialogue and pre-2020 stocktake stand as *rehearsals* for upcoming review and assessment exercises, such as the regular “multilateral consideration of progress” (Article 13) or the grand accounting theater of the global stocktake (Article 14). However, current assessment practice enacts an inverted version of the principle of “name and shame” by providing a stage for participants to “claim and shine.” This partly corresponds to the Paris Agreement’s script, which insists on the “non-intrusive,” purely “facilitative” nature of accounting exercises (Article 13). But it also stems from the way in which delegates enacted this script at successive COPs, where they refrained from direct

8. The following quotes are from COP25, “COP 25 Stocktake on Pre-2020 Implementation and Ambition,” observation notes, December 4 and 11, 2019.

criticism of their counterparts. This seemingly apolitical design (Weikmans et al. 2020) of existing assessments reflects substantial underlying political tensions. It is therefore hard to change directly. Despite this, a series of agents at COP25, including representatives from think tanks and NGOs, engaged in efforts to improve current assessment exercises. The Secretariat took an active part in such efforts. It intervened in events to signal the need to reinforce countries' reporting capacities. It also produced technical inputs on guidelines for national communications, concept notes to clarify the mandate of international experts, and proposals for partnerships with climate data providers. This strategy of including nonstate agents in transparency performances within the UNFCCC culminated in the workshop "Pressing 'Record' on Climate Action" on December 9 in one of the larger meeting venues.<sup>9</sup> There Luis Alfonso de Alba, UN special envoy for the 2019 Climate Action Summit, sketched an extended role for the UNFCCC in compiling and examining private climate action, including by proactively engaging discussions with climate data experts on new formats and indicators to support the global stocktake. In the words of a representative of the incoming COP26 Presidency, this would add a new voice to the "common song" of global climate action, alongside country submissions. By proactively supporting existing assessments, and by using side events to mobilize actors and equipment for upcoming ones, the Secretariat positioned itself as a key body in post-Paris climate governance.

### *Role Provision: Creating Momentum for Climate Action*

Another type of dramaturgical intervention shaped events in the wider conference space. Mandates and scripts for such events are usually less defined than they are for multilateral processes. This gives considerable leeway to organizers, especially the Secretariat and the Presidency. By selecting, scheduling, and sequencing events, they provide visibility to specific issues, frames, and agents (UNFCCC Secretariat 2020). The Chilean Presidency used these prerogatives to imprint an urgency framing on COP25 by branding the slogan "Time for Action" and through a series of events that provided a stage for admonishers. A high-level event Climate Emergency was organized during the second week on the conference's plenary stage.<sup>10</sup> Environmental scientist Johan Rockström opened the event by presenting research on climate tipping points. This set the scene for other panelists, who evoked the "powerful voice of science" (Spanish minister for the ecological transition Teresa Ribera) or its "guiding light" (executive director of Greenpeace Jennifer Morgan) and claimed, "We no longer have time to leave out the science" (activist Greta Thunberg).

But "Time for Action" not only stresses emergency; it also evokes the new focus on implementation. This shift was embodied in the centrally located

9. COP25, "Pressing 'Record' on Climate Action," CAMDA Workshop on tracking progress 2020–2023, Global Climate Action event, December 5, 2019.
10. COP25, high-level event on "Climate Emergency," December 11, 2019.



Climate Action Hub, which was designed by the Secretariat as a theater of achievements and climate solutions. This new space—first introduced at COP24 in Katowice—displayed nonstate climate action in several new formats. Among them, the Global Climate Action awards ceremony was announced as a “moment of celebration ... with inspiring speakers, videos, photography, and a musical performance.”<sup>11</sup> It placed the spotlight on fifteen carefully selected examples of technological and social innovations by individuals, city governments, and business leaders. These were presented as evidence of a global groundswell of climate action. The Secretariat facilitated these and other activities by providing specific Global Climate Action badges for representatives of civil society, start-ups, businesses, and cities; establishing the agenda of events; and setting up a dedicated organizing team in the Climate Action Unit.

New actors are thus encouraged to populate climate governance arenas, exhibit their ideas and solutions on public stages, and attend informal meetings. This is noteworthy, as “the Paris Agreement itself says remarkably little about non-state and subnational action” (van Asselt et al. 2018, 30–31). While COP decisions specify elements like the mandating of IPCC special reports or the appointment of high-level champions, Presidencies and the Secretariat also intervene creatively by organizing public events and structuring interactions at COPs. In Madrid, they significantly shaped available roles in public performances. While the Climate Emergency event exemplifies the strong emphasis on the natural sciences and risk language that pervaded admonishing performances, the Global Climate Action award ceremony represents the focus on businesses and individuals in the quest for climate solutions. In both cases, role provision and casting aimed to attract media attention, while positioning the UN process as a necessary part of a solution. While some of these events did provide a space and public stage for (sometimes harsh) critique, they also tended to confirm dominant framings in climate debates by dissociating systemic critique in admonishing events from discussions on solutions and decontextualized best practices in the celebratory climate action events.

### *Counterscripting: Strategic Delay and Uninvited Participation*

COP25 was also characterized by tensions, and in some spaces, performances did involve direct contestation of dominant governance scripts. Difficult negotiations on several agenda items concerning reporting and transparency showed that accounting rules for countries were still highly contested. On some occasions, delegates also tried to counterscript and actively contest the implementation of the Paris Agreement, for example, through strategically delaying negotiations. This was visible, for example, in efforts by some developing countries led by China to adjourn decisions on common tabular formats

11. COP25, Global Climate Action Award Ceremony, December 10, 2019. The event belongs to the UN's Momentum for Change initiative, which is supported by major philanthropic organizations.

and other elements of the common accounting infrastructure (IISD Reporting Services 2019). No conclusion was reached at COP25, and discussions were postponed until the next COP. This was interpreted by some as a strategy to improve developing countries' negotiation position on issues of finance and adaptation. Similarly, Brazil's general unwillingness to compromise—most notably on Article 6—appeared as a tactic to buy time and return to the issue at a later, more favorable moment.<sup>12</sup>

Counterscripting also occurred outside official negotiations. Climate and social justice activists repeatedly made use of their access to the venue to disrupt procedures with protests and to challenge prevalent narratives. In their eyes, this would also ensure that their participation in the conference exceeded the invited and carefully staged admonishment that also provides legitimacy to the UNFCCC process. On December 11, close to the scheduled end of the COP, rumors of an impending flash mob were circulating, and activists eventually disrupted an event in one of the plenary rooms. UN security shut off parts of the venue and dissolved the flash mob of around 200 activists by pushing them through a nearby gate. The Secretariat called this “an unfortunate security incident” and temporarily took away their access rights to the venue. This reveals the limits of creating symbolic inclusiveness by providing access and visibility to activists. It also suggests that performances can only be controlled to a certain extent. Actors interpret or circumvent scripts, improvise on established roles, and use the attention provided by climate conferences to advance their own agendas.

## Conclusions

UN climate conferences are global political events that attract worldwide media attention and representatives from virtually every country of the world, but also from companies, municipalities, NGOs, and social movements. This article shows that they are also key sites of soft coordination in global climate governance. Using dramaturgical policy analysis as a conceptual lens and collaborative event ethnography as a method, we examined how core dispositions of the Paris governance framework—its ambition mechanism and strategy to facilitate nonstate climate action—were operationalized, enacted, (re)interpreted, and challenged during COP25 in Madrid in 2019.

Seen through the lens of dramaturgical policy analysis, the conference implemented a specific script, which stipulates a transition from negotiations to implementation and from a logic of top-down regulation to one of bottom-up pledges and social control through peer pressure and public assessments of progress. The material setting, organization, and agenda of COP25 reflected this new script. The conference appeared less as mainly diplomatic space and more as a transnational mega-event composed of a series of different

12. Background interview with a senior delegate.

stages, on which participants performed three social roles—accountant, admonisher, and animator. While the accountant role is clearly part of the Paris Agreement's script, the latter two are less directly traceable to formal provisions in legal documents. Both used a more emotional register and were particularly present in high-level and Presidency events. These roles and event formats, which attracted the largest audiences and staged the most dramatic performances and the greatest diversity of agents, appear as core elements of the ongoing governance shift.

Our analysis also indicates that the governance transition is not fully scripted and that its outcome remains uncertain. This provides room for actors to creatively interpret roles, alter the intended course of performances, and participate in scripting elements of the new regime. At COP25, the Secretariat and COP Presidency in particular intervened through a series of dramaturgical practices. These included background interventions, such as designing the venue and equipping its stages, setting up events, and casting participants, and delimiting available roles in public performances. The Presidency also shaped the overall narrative arc of the conference by circulating urgency frames and organizing a sequence of thematic events. Less visible but just as active, the Secretariat supported private climate action performances, intervened to equip state-led assessments with data, attracted nonstate agents to provide expertise and increase publicity, and supported fora for transparency outside the negotiations. These activities involved the strategic mobilization of organizational capacities and prerogatives. Together, they constitute what we might call a *dramaturgical repertoire* of soft coordination, through which the Secretariat exerts considerable influence beyond its formal mandate. Despite these efforts, however, state-led reporting formats, such as multilateral assessments, were poorly structured and attracted limited public attention. In practice, instead of naming and shaming laggards through rigorous peer monitoring, they provided occasions for “claiming and shining” through selective and punctual reporting.

Overall, the article makes three key contributions to research on soft coordination in global (climate) governance. Conceptually, it proposes a novel understanding of soft coordination as performative practice, instead of a formal relation of delegation based on (chains of) orchestration. This foregrounds symbolic and communicative governance dimensions that usually fall under the radar of legal, functionalist, or institutionalist perspectives. Methodologically, it provides an approach to examining soft coordination that combines ethnographic observations at UN climate conferences with an analytical focus on a limited set of dramaturgical practices. Finally, it empirically identifies actors, sites, and mechanisms of soft coordination in climate governance, showing that the current regime shift manifests in a set of typical event formats, social roles, and dramaturgical strategies, which enact performances of disclosure and review but also mobilize emotional communication frames to stress urgency and create momentum. A quick look at COP26 in Glasgow a year later, with its considerably enlarged Climate Action Zone, carefully casted celebrities, and flurry of

announcements and declarations, appears to corroborate our analysis (Aykut et al. 2022).

Of course, the analytical perspective sketched in this article also has its limitations. Observable performances represent only one among many types of activities that take place at UN climate conferences, let alone in the wider climate governance landscape. To provide a more complete picture, a dramaturgical lens must be complemented with perspectives that examine soft coordination through other means, such as the diffusion of global norms or the building of transnational networks. Research should also study the relations between soft and hard mechanisms of coordination. Under what conditions does soft coordination effectively supplement enforceable legal norms? When does it, on the contrary, constitute a substitute for, or a distraction from, binding regulations? Moreover, future research could take a more systematic look at changes in symbolic and communicative strategies over time to trace the evolution of dramaturgical practices and repertoires in climate governance and other governance fields. Our article hence opens new avenues of research that show that a focus on performances and dramaturgical practices represents, beyond the climate arena, an important and promising analytical entry point to grasp contemporary transformations of world politics.

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