

Why Brexit is a threat to the UK and the EU's climate diplomacy

Climate diplomacy is one of the best examples of the EU acting to enhance cooperation among its member states, and their collective voices on the global stage.

Both the EU and its member states are parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the framework within which international climate negotiations, and most notably the annual Conferences of the Parties (COPs) to the UNFCCC, take place.

The UK therefore benefits from enhanced representation in the UNFCCC through its EU membership, being both a party to the UNFCCC as the UK and as an EU member.

Contrary to how 'leave' campaigners often depict European cooperation, EU members still remain autonomy in the context of the UNFCCC, alongside pooling their diplomatic efforts.

A good example of this is France's recent hosting of COP21 in Paris at the end of 2015. While the French delegation very successfully presided over the summit, the EU also proved itself effective and flexible enough to speak with one voice, despite having to do so distinctly from one of its largest member countries.

The EU was instrumental to the successful negotiation of the Paris Agreement at COP21. This was because it successfully used its position as an ambitious bloc of developed countries to bridge the historically conflicting interests of reluctant developed countries and ambitious developing countries. It did so by building the High Ambition Coalition over the course of 2015, which eventually drew in well over 100 countries, including other big greenhouse gas emitters such as the US and Brazil.

The importance of big greenhouse gas emitters at international climate negotiations, rather than small island states who will sooner feel the worst effects of climate change, is one of the perverse realities of the current UNFCCC system.

For instance, the Paris Agreement will only enter into force after 55 countries that account for at least 55% of global emissions have ratified it. Given that the top 10 greenhouse gas emitting countries produce over 70% of total emissions, these countries' influence at negotiations is clear.

This is precisely why the UK is more influential as part of the EU than it would be on its own. Together, the EU represents around 9% of global greenhouse gas emissions, the third largest in the world, behind China at around 24%, and the US at around 12%. The UK on its own only emits a small and declining share of global greenhouse gas emissions, and as such, it would be lacking in influence at international climate negotiations if it were to leave the EU.

Yet, the EU achieves its influence at climate negotiations by other means than simply being a significant emitter. It primarily does so by enhancing diplomatic cooperation among its member states. The Green Diplomacy Network, of officials working on climate issues in EU

member states' foreign ministries, is a strong example of the sharing of diplomatic capabilities in this way.

However, the EU's climate diplomacy is also made up of more than just the shared diplomatic capabilities of its member countries. The European Commission's Directorate-General for Climate Action and the European External Action Service also play important roles in boosting the effectiveness of the EU's climate diplomacy, which proved its value so clearly at COP21.

The UK contributes many respected diplomats and experts to these European networks and services. This is epitomised by the fact that the EU's Principal Adviser on Climate Action and its Lead Negotiator for the UNFCCC is a British national.

The UK also plays an active role in drawing up the EU's position for international climate negotiations. For instance, it established the Green Growth Group, which helped to steer the EU's approach to COP21.

If the UK was to leave the EU, it would remove itself from all of these forms of cooperation, be they the diplomatic networks or the European services that shape the EU's climate diplomacy. This would weaken not just the global influence of the UK in international climate politics, but also that of the EU, which needs to continue to be as ambitious as possible in this area in order to encourage the world's other top emitters to reduce their emissions.

Climate change is the single greatest threat that the world faces today, and finding international solutions to the problem in the immediate term is of paramount importance.

Potentially weakening some of the most progressive actors at international climate negotiations is therefore one of the greatest, but less widely discussed, threats of a Brexit. And in this respect, it is a threat not only to the UK and the EU, but also to the level of ambition of the UNFCCC, which is running a race against time to save our climate from chaos.