



Platform design options: a survey of models

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A number of countries and organizations have contemplated the possibility of designing an online platform, registry, or clearinghouse for sub- and non-state climate actions, multi-stakeholder alliances, and action coalitions. Indeed, several organizations are already doing so in their areas of work. Most recently, paragraph 15(c) of the ADP co-chairs draft text of July 2014 (Doc. ADP.2014.8.DraftText) requests the Secretariat to:

“Make available a user-friendly and dynamic web-based tool summarizing the identified policy options in a manner that allows Parties to communicate their selected options and subnational authorities, including cities, international organizations, civil society, private sector entities, and cooperative initiatives to communicate the actions they are taking and the support available to Parties for implementation”

How might such a platform or set of platforms develop, and what could it hope to achieve? How might it fit into a larger framework of support and engagement around sub- and non-state actions, action coalitions, and other cooperative initiatives?

This memo reviews a number of existing online platforms related to climate change and other topics. The goal is to highlight options and considerations for the design of a broader climate platform. We hope to familiarize the reader with the various characteristics that many platforms share, and to emphasize various design choices. *The memo is purely informational. It should not in any way be read as circumscribing the discussion at the workshop, nor does it endorse a certain outcome.*

Five key features of existing platforms are identified: *goals, stakeholders, criteria for inclusion, data sources, and monitoring, verification, and compliance arrangements.* The memo then discusses three additional considerations: *operational requirements, external conditions for effectiveness, and incentives for participation.* It concludes with an appendix listing the various platforms that have been reviewed.



Platform characteristics

Goals

Existing platforms strive toward a number of distinct goals. Some aim to provide a vehicle for sub- and non-state actor to make or record new commitments. For example, the UN's Sustainable Development in Action registry collects the various initiatives announced at the Rio+10 and Rio+20 conferences, along with other similar commitments. Others aim simply to highlight a number of inspirational success stories, like the UNFCCC's Momentum for Change Website. Others, like ICLEI's carbonn Cities Climate Registry aim to quantify commitments/actions/inventories in order to facilitate peer-benchmarking and allow commitments/actions/inventories to be aggregated into a single unified measure. Still others aim to document and share information, like weADAPT, an online open space for researchers and practitioners working on climate adaptation. Many platforms hold a mix of different goals.

Distinct goals derive from different strategies for effecting change. For example, an aggregative platform seeks to demonstrate impact by adding up a number of separate commitments/actions into a whole. A platform that aims to increase the number of actions taken by sub/non-state actors would instead create reputational, financial, or other incentives for actors to join the platform. An accountability-oriented tool, in turn, may impose stringent criteria for participation. Clarity on goals is important because these strategies (and others) imply different design choices, as discussed below.

Stakeholders

Who is included in a platform, and who is its audience? Some platforms collect actions/commitments from a single kind of actor, such as national governments, cities, ministries, companies, investors, or individuals. For example, by focusing on companies, the UN Global Compact is able to build a community that is tailored to the attitudes and challenges faced by firms. Others, such as the Climate Registry, which sets standards and publicly reports greenhouse gas emissions in North America, include various actors on a single platform. This increases the potential scale of the project but requires the platform use a reporting mechanism that is sufficiently universal across the different participants.

A platform's goals may lead it to speak to multiple audiences. Some are geared toward the participants in the platform. For example, Luum, a user-driven data platform to encourage sustainable transportation, requires users to create profiles and then rewards progress towards particular challenges with badges, prizes and recognition. Others, instead, aim to communicate the sub/non-state actors' commitments and actions to a broader community of external stakeholders including like-minded parties facing similar challenges, potential supporters (e.g. funders and donors) or critics (e.g. monitoring NGOs). Some platforms pursue both of these functions at once. Momentum For Change, by highlighting success stories in certain focus areas, simultaneously motivates the participants whose progress is highlighted while also showcasing success and sharing lessons with a broader community.



Criteria for inclusion

Platforms vary significantly in how stringently they screen actions/commitments. Some allow essentially anyone to register any type of action, provided it fits within the subject area of focus. Others make specific requirements regarding format and, less commonly, content of the action/commitments they include. The Climate Registry, for example, is a prescriptive platform: it dictates a thorough process for measuring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions. The UN's Sustainable Development in Action registry, instead, simply asks participants to specify "deliverables" and the resources that will be dedicated to them.

Data sources and process

A crucial but often overlooked characteristic of platforms is the process through which they identify and register commitments and actions. Some platforms rely on individual participants to submit their own actions or commitments, or, like DevelopmentCheck, use trained community volunteers to monitor actions and collect data. Others, for example, more informational networks, record information about different participants based on staff research, or simply "scrape" information from existing data sources for aggregation on the platform. Many platforms employ some combination of these techniques. The Sustainable Development in Action platform aggregates commitments from various other UN platforms while also allowing participants to submit commitments themselves. Each strategy of course entails a different balance of operational requirements for platform hosts and participants.

Monitoring, verification and compliance

How much does a platform invest in ensuring that the actions it registers are accurate and demonstrate meaningful progress? Many platforms do very little on this front, with several simply taking self-reported commitments and actions as given. Others employ moderately more stringent processes. The UN Global Compact, for example, requires companies to submit annual communications on their progress toward the Compact's principles. Companies that fail to report are de-listed. Most stringently, a platform may require independent, third-party verification of compliance (for example, the UN's Every Woman Every Child platform). In the attached Table, HarassMap, Global Forest Watch and Development Check use citizen reporting as an accountability mechanism.

Broader considerations

Operational demands

What is required to operate a platform? None of the platforms surveyed involve particularly significant investments of time and money, though an initial investment in development and conceptualization is key. Most operate with a relatively small staff and budget. Anecdotally, several platforms report that they find it difficult to fulfill their very broad mandates with the relatively modest level of resources they possess.

Conditions for effectiveness



Thus far the memo has evaluated different design options of existing platforms. But to succeed, many platforms are nested in a broader community, of which the online platform was only one part. Many of the significant commitments made on the Every Woman Every Child platform were made, not online, but during the 2010 launch of the project at the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit in September 2010. If a platform relies upon commitments being communicated to a wider audience in order to inspire greater momentum from similar actors, then a prominent, visible, and ongoing relationship with those actors is necessary in order for the platform to achieve its goal. Similarly, proper monitoring and verification may be improved if there is an engaged community with sufficient expertise to track commitments. In the case of Global Forest Watch, civil society and citizens, aided by satellite photos, provided such a community. Within the community, sufficient scale and experience may be a precondition for success. For example, if one goal is to build a learning community amongst participants, that goal requires a significant number of participants facing similar kinds of challenges who see enough value in each others' experiences to want to learn from each other.

Incentives to participate

A key consideration for all platforms is what incentives actors have to engage with them. For those that depend on sub/non-state actors to make submissions, the question of incentives is particularly important. What benefits do sub/non-state actors obtain from registration? Legitimacy and recognition? Access to material support? Access to information? Under what conditions are these various benefits likely to be of more or less use to sub/non-state actors?