A discursive cartography of nationally determined contributions to the Paris climate agreement

Maria Jernnäs\textsuperscript{a,b}, Björn-Ola Linnér\textsuperscript{c,d,e,⁎}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of Thematic Studies – Environmental Change, Linköping University, Sweden
\textsuperscript{b} Centre for Climate Science and Policy Research, Linköping University, Sweden
\textsuperscript{c} Linköpings Universitet, Institutionen för Tema/Tema Miljöförändring Department of Thematic Studies – Environmental Change, 581 86, Linköping, Sweden
\textsuperscript{d} Stockholm Environment Institute, Box 24218, 104 51 Stockholm, Sweden
\textsuperscript{e} Institute for Science, Innovation and Society, Oxford University

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Paris agreement
Nationally determined contributions
Country coalitions
North-south relations
Climate discourses
Storylines

ABSTRACT

The 2015 Paris Agreement was adopted in a geopolitical context that is very different from the post-Cold War era when the Climate Convention was negotiated. This new global climate deal responds to a more fragmented and multipolar world signified by the rise of major economies in the South. This paper examines the geopolitical landscape in which the Paris Agreement is enacted and implemented. We conduct a discursive analysis of the Nationally Determined Contributions submitted by parties to the Paris Agreement. We ask what policy discourses emerge in these national climate plans, which states cluster around them and how they compare to UNFCCC annex, geographical location, income group, and negotiation coalitions. Our findings suggest that liberal environmentalism retains a strong hold over the political imagination in the post-Paris landscape. However, we see points of diffraction and tensions that might give rise to conflict. While liberal environmentalism is only challenged in Nationally Determined Contributions from the global South, we conclude that conventional geopolitical patterns only partly explain the formation of discourse coalitions. In the Paris Agreement’s implementation stage discursive struggles are likely to become increasingly prominent. Discourse analysis facilitates understanding of disagreements on the Paris rulebook and the global stocktake.

1. Introduction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), signed in 1992, was negotiated in a post-Cold War context of a rupturing binary balance of superpowers and profound post-colonial North-South divisions, centred on development cooperation, technology transfer, and influence in international institutions (O’Brien and Williams, 2013; Potter et al., 2008). In line with this binary division, the UNFCCC outlines parties’ obligations and responsibilities based on a division of states, with developed countries listed in Annex I and developing countries labelled as non-Annex I. Following the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the landscape for coalition-making looks radically different for two reasons: the changing political economy of the world and the hybridisation of global climate governance.

The Paris Agreement was created in a multipolar world that bears little resemblance to the geopolitical landscape in which the Convention was negotiated, with emerging economies challenging the long-standing dominance of the US (Ciplet et al., 2015). In addition to increasing disparity between the richest and poorest states of the world, the group of developing states is itself increasingly diversified in greenhouse gas (GHG) dependency as well as economically, socially, and politically (Ciplet et al., 2015) – as reflected in the stratification of states according to levels of national income or human development. In contrast to the targets-and-timetables approach of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement is a hybrid model with parties’ Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) at its core. It urges all parties to independently pledge their respective contributions to the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, which are subjected to international review. The hybrid arrangement is further reflected in the state-led commitments being combined with UNFCCC orchestration of non-state initiatives (Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Kuyper et al., 2018; Roelfsema et al., 2018).

How is this changing landscape of global climate governance...
reflected in parties’ contributions to the Paris Agreement? This article analyses how parties’ NDCs cluster in terms of ideas and how they correspond to today’s multipolar geopolitical setting. This differs from previous analyses of the NDCs, which have largely approached the NDCs from a quantitative perspective. While several studies have attempted to assess the effect of full NDC implementation on the Paris temperature target (Höhne et al., 2018; Rogelj et al., 2016; van Soest et al., 2017), others have zoomed in on specific issue areas to examine, for instance, how adaptation or equity are represented and operationalised in the NDCs (Klimsky et al., 2017; Maljean-Dubois, 2016; Mathur and Mohan, 2016; Rajamani, 2015). Less attention has been awarded to how discursive struggles on the constitutions of problems, solutions, and goals in the NDCs shape post-Paris climate negotiations. Tobin et al. (2018) provide a first such attempt using discourse network analysis to examine the types of reduction targets proposed in the NDCs and how cross-national patterns correlate to negotiation coalitions of big emitters. Our study adds to the existing literature by providing a large-n discourse analysis of the environmental policy discourses that emerge in the NDCs. A core assumption in critical policy analysis is that policy positions are underpinned and constituted by discourse (Fischer, 2015). As the main policy instruments under the Paris Agreement, the NDCs are embedded in a larger context of climate governance, which in turn is fused with discursive contestation as to what constitutes possible, appropriate, and desirable policies for dealing with climate change.

We discursively analyse all 136 NDCs representing 164 parties to the Paris Agreement to examine how parties portray climate change as a political problem and the modes of governance they propose in response to this problem. We identify the policy discourses that parties articulate and the discourse coalitions that consequently emerge around them. We compare the resulting cartography of discourse coalitions to four geopolitical factors (UNFCCC negotiating coalitions, UNFCCC annex, income group, and geographic location) to examine whether conventional state-patterns are still valid or if new clusters of states can be identified. Three questions guide the analysis: What policy discourses emerge in the NDCs? Which parties cluster around these discourses? To what extent do these discourse coalitions correspond with, or divert from, conventional patterns in international climate governance?

The paper starts by giving the background to the dominating political ideas that have surrounded the UNFCCC, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement. We then present the four geopolitical factors to which we compare the discourse coalitions. After that, we lay out a discursive approach to policy analysis and present previous discursive analyses of environmental policy. This is followed by a presentation of the NDCs and how they were analysed through operationalisation of the concepts of storylines and discourse coalitions. In the following section, we describe the eight major storylines in the NDCs and how the emerging cartography of discourse coalitions relate to the four geopolitical factors. Finally, we conclude that geopolitical patterns only partly explain the formation of discourse coalitions and that discursive struggles are becoming increasingly prominent as the details of the Paris Agreement are concretised.

2. Background

2.1. Political ideas in international climate governance

From the onset of the negotiations leading up to the UNFCCC in 1992, the North portrayed climate change as a principally environmental problem while the South emphasised how climate policy was intertwined with their needs for development (Sebenius, 1994). Ever since the 1960s, developing countries have expressed concerns that environmental protection could be employed to confine their sovereignty or for maintaining an economic dependency through environmentally motivated protectionism – a sort of covert ‘eco-colonialism’ (Níteze, 1994, p. 196; Linnér and Selin, 2013). Importantly, these enunciations did not mean that developing countries prioritised the environment less than developed countries. Rather, it was a matter of accountability for environmental crises, whereby developing countries argued that those that had acquired their position in the world economy while polluting should be responsible for cleaning up.

The South’s criticism of environmental cooperation as framed by the North has been a part of a broader critique of the economic system that has kept them in economic dependence. This critique resulted, among other things, in the 1974 UN General Assembly decision on a New International Economic Order (NIEO) aimed at restructuring the rules that governed trade and financial flows, taking into account the needs of developing countries while preserving the environment (United Nations, 1974a, b). Despite the UN General Assembly decision, NIEO never achieved any lasting change in practice. It demonstrates, nevertheless, that radical system critique is possible in high international politics.

Bernstein (2001) argues that a broad consensus on the environment vs. development conflict was epitomised in the adoption of the UNFCCC where the values of the liberal economic order – in which growth is perceived not only as compatible with but as a prerequisite for environmental protection – were institutionalised. Liberal environmentalism thus constituted the setting within which climate change was framed and solutions found (Bernstein, 2001). The Kyoto Protocol furthered the idea of economy-environment compatibility by enhancing the centrality of market-based and flexibility mechanisms that accentuated the principle of cost-effectiveness (Grubb et al., 1999).

During the Kyoto negotiations, the North-South impasse was prominent. The annex division has led to continual disputes, as some Northern countries have argued that the annexes created in the early 1990s are not applicable to the geopolitical situation and emissions patterns of the twenty-first century (Grubb et al., 1999).

The 2015 Paris Agreement sets in motion a pledge-and-review framework, which was rejected as inadequate in the UNFCCC negotiations in the 1990s (Dasgupta, 1994). It stresses the sovereignty of each state in determining its national contribution and, in contrast to the Kyoto Protocol, asks all parties to contribute to the global effort to address climate change, implying an incipient loosening of the binary annex division. The Paris Agreement approach thus demonstrates in principle a retreat from post-Cold War bipolar UN diplomacy towards more decentralised international climate governance that reflects the multipolar world of today.

2.2. The geopolitics of the UNFCCC

To understand the dynamics of international cooperation on climate change, consideration of broader geopolitical factors is essential (Ciplet et al., 2015; Dalby, 2016). Starting from arguments of an increasing fragmentation, multipolarity, or polycentricity of international climate governance – of which the Paris Agreement’s hybrid design could be considered an institutionalisation – this paper examines the emerging discourse coalitions in the light of four geopolitical factors: UNFCCC annex, income grouping, geographical region, and UNFCCC negotiation coalitions.

The UNFCCC annex division was established in 1992 to differentiate between commitments, where Annex I distinguishes parties with obligations to reduce their emissions. It includes those industrialised countries that were members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in 1992 and countries with economies in transition in the former Eastern bloc. The so-called non-Annex I gathers all other countries, corresponding to those classified as developing in 1992. The annex categories do no longer fully correspond to parties’ economic positions and capabilities. The World Bank distinguishes

---

1 Submitted to the UNFCCC until 27 November 2017.
between four income categories for their analysis and operations: low, lower-middle, upper-middle and high income countries. To some extent, the many negotiation coalitions in the UNFCCC reflect these categories, while others instead reflect geographical proximity or common preconditions (e.g., the Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs)). Some coalitions mirror groupings established outside the climate change context (e.g., the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC) while others have emerged during the almost three decades of climate negotiations (e.g., the Umbrella Group [UG] of non-European Union [EU] developed countries). States often belong to multiple coalitions. For instance, since the first Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC, the Group of 77 & China (G77) comprising developing countries has continuously coalesced into new coalitions, such as the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the African Group (AG), Least Developed Countries (LDCs), and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) (Vihma et al., 2011). Recent years have also seen coalitions emerging that bridge the North-South divide, such as the Cartagena Dialogue and the High Ambition Coalition, the latter gathering together over 100 countries across income groupings to push for an ambitious outcome in Paris (Christoff, 2016). In addition, other transnational actors, such as cities, businesses and civil society, have emerged in the UNFCCC arena, either creating coalitions of their own (e.g., C40 or The B Team) or joining in with states to create groups that extend beyond intergovernmental cooperation (e.g., the 2050 Pathway Platform or the Under2 Coalition) (Bäckstrand et al., 2017).

3. Analysing climate policy through discourse

Since the 1970s, critical policy analysis has been forwarded to bring norms and values into policy analysis (Fischer et al., 2015). Discourse analysis is one tool to examine how an issue is constituted as a policy problem and what effects this might have for how the problem is approached (Fischer, 2015; Lövbrand and Strippke, 2015). While knowledge about, for instance, emissions levels or economic costs of mitigation actions are important, the presentation of such facts has not led to sufficient climate action: in fact, GHG emissions increased in 2017 (WMO, 2018). From a critical policy studies perspective, the claim that better arguments – based on neutral facts – lead to better policy falls short due to its neglect of the roles that norms and values play in policy making and implementation (Fischer, 2015). Difficulties to cooperate are not necessarily ‘simply contests over facts’, but may include contestation over ‘what is perceived and accepted as a relevant “fact”’ due to different definitions and interpretations of the problem at hand (Yanow, 2015, p. 404). Using discourse analysis to examine the ways in which a policy problem is defined and represented makes explicit underlying political conflicts which may hinder more ambitious climate action (Hajer, 1995). For instance, Foucault (1972) talks about ‘points of distraction’ that can occur because discourses contain incompatible elements and at which discursive struggles become apparent. Conversely, examining the underlying rationales of actors’ policy positions increases the understanding of where there is common ground on which to further cooperation (Wagenaar, 2015).

Inspired by the Foucauldian rejection of any a priori understanding of the state’s functions and location, we examine the various ways in which state action on climate change can be construed. Discourses provide templates for accessible and inaccessible actions, which in turn constrains an actor’s options in choosing how to behave (Hay, 2002). In that sense, discourses are ‘sites of social relations of power’ that ‘define social fields of action that are imaginable and possible’ (Barnett and Duvall, 2005, p. 21), which are underpinned by, and gain authority through, institutions such as coalitions (Foucault, 1972). Power, then, not only concerns coercive power wielded through states’ legislative and military instances but is also exercised through social practices, language, and systems of knowledge. It is thus necessary to reflect upon dominating discourses and frames of reference as they condition the way in which actors perceive the rationale and scope of action. Hence, this paper argues that discourses inform the focus and direction of climate governance. Here, the NDCs constitute a central piece that provides insight into parties’ representations of climate change as a political problem and – due to the centrality of NDCs as starting points for the global stocktake to increase ambition in 2023 – how multiple interpretations of climate change will inform future negotiations on the Paris Agreement.

To operationalise the concept we use Hajerös (1995, p. 44) definition of discourse as a ‘specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities’. Accordingly, we view discourses as having a constitutive role in political processes. Actors are not separated from the discourse within which they act, but have some power to employ discursive expressions to their advantage. Expressions of discourse thus turn into argumentative struggles as actors practice discourse to emphasise their own problem description. For this study, this implies that states as discursive subjects are constrained or enabled by the policy discourse(s) within which they find themselves, while having the possibility to make strategic use of discourse to convey their individual problem formulation.

Previous discursive analyses show that environmental policy discourses predominantly fall into two categories: those that reinforce or critique the liberal political economic system (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007, 2016; Bernstein, 2001; Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). At present, the discourse dominating environmental governance can be labelled Ecological Modernization. It assumes compatibility of economic growth and environmental protection and envisons flexible, cost-effective solutions, such as market mechanisms (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007; Hajer, 1995; Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). Taking a managerial perspective on environmental issues, the discourse of Green Governmentality (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007) emphasises the need for expert knowledge, big data, and management of natural resources when dealing with environmental issues.

Without fundamentally questioning the present political economy, Expansive Sustainability (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014) or reformist Civic Environmentalism (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007) envision a participatory approach to environmental governance that empowers weaker groups in society, thus attempting to even out inequalities. In contrast, radical Civic Environmentalism (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007), Green Radicalism (Dryzek, 2013), or Radical Transformationism (Stevenson, 2015) reject the sufficiency of merely increasing participation in current institutions, instead envisioning a fundamental transformation of international institutions that leads to a redistribution of power. The storylines identified in the NDCs partly mirror these previously identified discourses, but also point at new ways in which climate change can be construed.

4. Method and material

This paper discursively analyses 136 NDCs representing 164 parties to the Paris Agreement, including the EU. The 28 EU member states have submitted one joint NDC. The NDCs were downloaded from the UNFCCC NDC Interim Registry until 27 November 2017, at which time 170 parties had ratified the Paris Agreement and of which 164 had submitted their first NDC. Some of the NDCs are ‘unofficial translations’ from the original language into English. As they have been submitted to the UNFCCC they are representative of the party’s position.

The NDCs may differ in scope, ambition, and language but cover to
The promise of decarbonisation
The most prominent storyline emerging from the NDCs is that of The Promise of Decarbonisation, with 157 out of 164 parties highlighting the co-benefits of climate action. To a large extent they express a vision of a ‘transition to a low carbon economy’ (Canada) or of achieving ‘green and low-carbon development across the globe and promot[ing] sustainable development worldwide’ (China). The level at which something is defined as ‘low carbon’, is, however, essentially left unquantified. The storyline also infers an ambition to secure economic development while simultaneously reducing carbon use: ‘the country should direct all its domestic efforts and international alliances to decoupling economic growth from greenhouse gas emissions’ (Chile); ‘already reduced their emissions by around 19% on 1990 levels while GDP has grown by more than 44% over the same time’ (EU). Manifestly, the problem to be dealt with is the issue of cost-effectiveness: ‘under-took a range of mitigation actions, prioritising those with the most promising costperformance ratio’ (Monaco); ‘their potential as lowcarbon sources of energy and their perceived cost-effectiveness warranted their inclusion in the analysis’ (Pakistan).

5. Results
In this section we present the eight storylines that emerge from the discourse analysis. This is followed by a presentation of the discourse coalitions which are compared to the four geopolitical factors.

5.1. Storylines in NDCs
The storylines are presented in order of the number of parties that articulate them. While this gives some indication as to how prevalent each storyline is in the NDCs, it should not be considered a blueprint of each storyline’s capacity to shape global climate governance. In line with Hajer (1995), we do not attempt to draw unsurpassable boundaries between discourses. Rather than obscuring the ambiguities of parties’ expressions through introducing a strict taxonomy, the identified storylines in some senses overlap.

5.1.1. The promise of decarbonisation
The discourse coalitions were compared to states’ geographical location (UN Statistics Division, 2018), income group (World Bank, 2017), annex, and traditional negotiation coalition affiliations in the UNFCCC. While the first three are binary, countries’ coalition memberships are often both multiple and overlapping. For this paper, Carbon Briefs (2015) review has been used to determine the coalition affiliation of the various parties. The alphabet soup of coalitions covered in the paper are: AG; AILAC; ALBA; AOSIS; Arab League; BASIC; CACAM; Cartagena Dialogue; CRN; EG; EU; G77; LGDCs; LLDCs; LMDCs; OIF; OPEC; SIDS; and UG. Due to the ratification and submission issues mentioned above, not all coalition members are included in the analysis, meaning that conclusions about the discursive coherence of coalitions are applicable only to the members that are included in the analysis.

Table 1
Examples of analysis of nodes identified in the NDCs. For an overview of all nodes, please refer to appendix IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>What is the problem?</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decoupling possible</td>
<td>GHG emissions are not sufficiently decoupled from economic growth</td>
<td>Growth and environmental sustainability are reconcilable interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising awareness</td>
<td>People are not sufficiently knowledgeable about climate change and action alternatives</td>
<td>With increased knowledge and participation, climate change can be addressed in a better way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature as sink</td>
<td>The potential of natural resources as CO2 sinks is not sufficiently tapped</td>
<td>With improved management of natural resources, climate change can be addressed in a better way</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
1. The Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean
2. The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America
3. Central Asia, Caucasus, Albania and the Republic of Moldova
4. Coalition for Rainforest Nations
5. Environmental Integrity Group
6. Like Minded Group of Developing Countries
7. International Organisation of la Francophonie
8. Small Island Developing States
current world order. The storyline reproduces a worldview in which climate change can – and should – be met using the basic mechanisms provided by the liberal economic order, where economic growth and environmental sustainability are not competing interests. Rather, the practices of economic exchange merely need to be corrected to achieve both economic prosperity and mitigation of climate change.

5.1.2. Mending the climate through natural resource management

This storyline articulates the possibility and need to manage natural resources to deal with climate change challenges. It is expressed by 155 parties, with an aim of ‘restoring the natural ecology system to respond to climate change’ (Cambodia), or ambition to ‘help manage forest health and set landscape natural restoration/regenerative objectives as an integral part of mitigation practice’ (Costa Rica). Forest and land resources are to be managed as GHG sinks to reach national reduction targets and/or to minimise the effects of climate change: ‘with strengthened regulations and aggressive plans for reforestation, it is expected that the country will benefit from the sink effect’ (Pakistan); ‘recognise permanent, long-term enhancements of carbon sinks resulting from new management’ (New Zealand); ‘widen carbon storage through sustainable forest management’ (Nepal). Some parties emphasise the services provided by natural resources that should be tapped to provide both climate- and non-climate benefits: ‘projects whose objective is not PRINCIPALLY the reduction of GHG (mainly through carbon sequestration), but the enhancement of environmental services such as food security, water and soil conservation, sustainable agriculture’ (Burkina Faso); ‘protecting and re-establishing forests for their economic and environmental services’ (Ethiopia).

Inherent in this storyline is the conviction that humans have a desirable ability to manage natural resources. Most states include a normative, but unspecified, disclaimer that this management should be sustainable. Further, it indicates that the services that nature can provide have a socio-economic value, which needs to be protected from the impacts of climate change.

5.1.3. Tapping the potential of non-state climate action

A total of 114 parties express their aim to induce or involve non-state climate action as part of their response to climate change: for example, ‘so that the products of the [stakeholder consultation] represent the views and aspirations of all the stakeholders and respond to their needs’ (Botswana). Non-state actors’ involvement in and access to decision-making processes as well as their involvement in bearing some of the costs is here portrayed as an opportunity, or even essential, to fulfil the plans. Thus, ‘different sectors, communities and society in general [are encouraged to] define their mitigation and adaptation goals, based on their own economic, social and cultural, gender sensitive options for the wellbeing of a low emission society’ (Costa Rica).

While some parties do not define which non-state actors to involve, others envision tapping the potential of different types of non-state actors: ‘the private sector will be a privileged partner of government for implementing the INDC’ (Namibia); ‘importance of the engagement of local governments and of their efforts in combating climate change’ (Brazil); ‘ensuring the participation of the private sector, CSO, Non-Governmental Organization, and youth and women’s groups’ (Gambia). The aim of involving non-state actors is further expressed in calls for greater awareness of climate change-related challenges. NDCs convey, for example, the need to ‘enhance […] education and training to fully utilize the function of schools, communities and civil organisations’ (China) and to ‘improve public awareness and understanding of various stakeholders about climate change, vulnerabilities and impacts in order to increase stakeholder willingness to take actions’ (Lao).

This storyline acknowledges the potential benefits of extending climate change governance beyond the state and, thus, accentuates a long-standing trend of involving non-state actors for a variety of reasons, such as effectiveness, legitimacy, and fairness (Bäckstrand et al., 2017). Nonetheless, beyond involvement in planning and decision-making along with educational campaigns, the storyline does not envision any power redistribution among the different societal groups.

5.1.4. Climate change as an urgent security threat

A prominent storyline which strongly contrasts the linchpins of the win-win approach to climate action is that of Climate Change as an Urgent Security Threat. Adherents to this storyline stress the urgency of acting to avoid the dangers that climate change brings. The storyline is apparent in statements on the ‘major threat […] to the economic development and general welfare’ (Namibia) that climate change poses and in assertions that climate change is ‘putting lives, property and the allied socio-economic features of [the] country at risk’ (Pakistan). The storyline also encompasses utterances regarding challenges ‘to the survival and development of the human race’ (China) and the belief that ‘climate change is a potential threat for humanity’ (Azerbaijan). On this note, several states emphasise an existential threat: ‘climate change is real and is the greatest threat to low lying atolls and people’ (Tuvalu); ‘climate change threatens the very existence of the nation and population, [and] adaptation is not an option – but rather a matter of survival’ (Kiribati).

Climate change is also linked to national security issues, for example in relation to ‘altered rainfall patterns […] resulting in serious conflict over land use’ (Guinea) and increasing aridity, said to be a ‘contributing factor to the current conflict and high degree of insecurity in the region’ (Nigeria). Indonesia refers to ‘socio-economic disparity [that] will potentially contribute to political instability in regions most affected by climate change’.

The Climate Change as an Urgent Security Threat storyline, expressed by 85 out of the 164 parties included in this study, suggests that the magnitude of climate change is so great that it ought to become an overriding priority for action. Hence, it highlights the inadequacy of a win-win approach by justifying vigorous climate action through a recognition of the fundamental problem that climate change presents.

5.1.5. Empowering the vulnerable

While most parties express concern about their general climate vulnerability, 79 parties directly emphasise the ‘need to protect vulnerable populations from the negative effects of climate change’ (Brazil), acknowledging that climate change ‘takes its deepest toll on the most vulnerable sectors of the population’ (Chile). Adherents to this storyline highlight, for example, the need to ‘facilitate the integration of gender into policy and programming’ (Jordan) and aim to ‘incorporate a gender perspective to promote and ensure active, continuous, full and equal participation of women’ (Peru). Other vulnerable groups are also identified, such as ‘the elderly, persons with disabilities and environmental refugees’ (Ethiopia) and ‘farmers and small producers […] and people whose livelihood mainly depends on the use of natural resources’ (Guinea). Additionally, some NDCs underline the need ‘to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations’ (Zimbabwe), arguing that ‘environmental sustainability […] involves both intra-generational and inter-generational equity’ (India).

This storyline is characterised by at least a partial recognition of power structures at the national or international level and of the unlevel playing field that penalises some vulnerable groups and benefits others. To solve this imbalance, however, the adherents to the storyline do not necessarily envision systemic socio-economic changes but, rather, the incorporation of the needs of vulnerable groups in decision-making and planning practices.

5.1.6. Equitable climate action

Related to the above storyline, Equitable Climate Action is expressed in 45 NDCs and emphasise the need for climate change action to be guided by principles of equity. This is evident in assertions that ‘[the] transition to a low carbon and climate resilient society must take into account and emphasise its overriding priority to address poverty and inequality’ (South Africa), and that it is vital to ‘manage […] risks with equity and efficiency’ (Dominican Republic). Climate change is itself
also perceived as ‘a factor which enhances social inequality’ (Chile). Some adherents to this storyline also emphasise the need for ‘protection and promotion of all the human rights potentially undermined by [climate change]’ (Chile) and argue that ‘it is fundamental to incorporate a [...] human rights-sensitive approach’ (Georgia).

The *Equitable Climate Action* storyline acknowledges that the liberal economic order fails in some respects. Rather than taking an overall positive view of the possibilities inherent in climate change action, this storyline emphasises existing economic and social power structures in the global political economy that need to be considered when dealing with climate change. Importantly, however, the storyline does not explicitly require changes in the liberal economic order in order to overcome these inequalities.

5.1.7. Climate action as a threat to economic development

This storyline is articulated by 15 parties that express concern about action taken to mitigate and adapt to climate change and that portray such action as a threat to national economic development. Within this storyline two distinct groups can be discerned, differing in their perception of the way in which this threat is to be approached.

The first group includes parties that highlight the need to identify climate actions that ‘reduce emission without significantly affecting the country’s economic and social development’ (Djibouti). While also pointing to social and economic challenges, parties in this group highlight the potentially negative consequences of climate action for social and economic development. In contrast to *Equitable Climate Action*, however, attempts to address these issues are not necessarily directed towards reducing societal inequalities. Here, climate change is thought to entail ‘tradeoffs with economic growth and social development in the shortrun [that] needs to be factored in the policy matrix, where eradication of poverty is one of the foremost priorities’ (India). It is important for this group that ‘climate change mitigation actions should not reverse the social and economic trends’ (Armenia), and actions must therefore be chosen carefully to make sure that the actions eventually taken are compatible with the country’s developmental and economic goals. As such, it reflects the position among developing countries since the late 1960s that environmental actions should not augment the economic disparities of the prevailing economic order.

The second group portrays another way of dealing with the threat of climate action to economic growth. It emphasises, for example, that ‘there is an uncertainty from the potential impact of the implementation of response measures to climate change that may negatively impact the strength of Qatar’s economy and potentially the quality of life of its residents’ (Qatar). The group describes some climate actions, for example, as ‘market-distorting actions such as fuel taxes, subsidies and incentives for all complementary sources of energy’ (Saudi Arabia) and emphasises that the UNFCCC article 4.8 on the specific concerns of fossil fuel-dependent countries should guide decisions on the action to be taken. This reflects the idea that interstate intervention in economic practices should be compensated, as it is a distorting market intervention.

In contrast to the *Decarbonisation* storyline, which also focuses on economic exchange, this storyline highlights the opposing interests involved in climate action. The adherents of this storyline emphasise that the development of the economy must not be jeopardised by climate action, indicating a diversion from the perception of climate action as a win-win opportunity for development.

5.1.8. System change, not climate change

Expressed by 13 states, this storyline highlights the necessity of embarking on a new path of societal and economic development. There is some variation in the level of criticism expressed towards the current world order. While, for instance, Sierra Leone articulates a will to ‘create a new era for a harmonious relationship between the economy, environment, social and long-term sustainability’, Bolivia emphasises what it sees as the structural cause of climate change: the capitalist liberal world order. Taking the concept of ‘Living Well’ (buen vivir), Bolivia argues that a new ‘model of civilization in the world without consumerism, war-mongering, and mercantilism, a world without capitalism’ should be created. This storyline also comprises calls to ‘construct the socialist power’ (North Korea), and a need to curb ‘the extravagant way of life and a profligate pattern of consumerism [that constitute] a grave threat to environment’ (India).

This storyline also comprises calls to consider individuals’ responsibility to nature a guiding principle: ‘constructing [an] ecological civilization [...] as its policy orientation’ (China); ‘we should act as “trustees” and use our natural resources wisely as it is our moral responsibility to ensure that we bequeath to the future generations a healthy planet’ (India). Further, the win-win approach inherent in several of the storylines above is questioned in claims that ‘ecological red lines’ (China) or ‘ecological constraints’ (India) should be identified in order for society to stay within these limits. As such, the possibility of infinite expansion of human activity – if only the right technology and mechanisms are in place – is rejected. Some adherents to the storyline also highlight the ‘rights and duties inherent to the environment [...] accorded to natural and legal persons’ (Morocco), also evident in Bolivia’s ‘Law [...] of The Rights of Mother Earth’. This implies a diversification from managerial views of nature in which socio-economic value is the foremost reason to protect natural resources.

This storyline stresses the inability of the current liberal system to adequately deal with the issue of climate change. As such, the storyline partly resembles the climate justice movement’s goals of a world order based on justice and of inducing system change, not climate change (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2016).

5.2. A discursive cartography of NDCs

Each storyline emerging from the NDCs forms the basis of a discourse coalition that to different extents break or converge with traditional patterns of states. Table 2 below summarises each storyline’s characteristics and demonstrates how they compare to the traditional negotiation coalitions. Fig. 1 shows the discourse coalitions in relation to the UNFCCC annex and income groupings. Last, the discourse coalitions are compared to geographical regions, creating a discursive cartography of the NDCs.

The UNFCCC annex division to a large extent converge with the identified discourse coalitions. While the two biggest discourse coalitions gather together almost all parties included in the analysis, the remaining six storylines are dominated by non-Annex I parties. Among them, the storyline of *Tapping the Potential of Non-State Climate Action* stands out as it gathers together predominantly non-Annex I parties (109) but also five Annex I countries.

Comparing the discourse coalitions to levels of national income, two patterns emerge. First, high-income countries primarily articulate the two most common storylines, with only a fourth or less expressing storylines about vulnerable groups, equity, and security threats in relation to climate change. Moreover, the discourse coalition around the storyline of *System Change, Not Climate Change* does not include any high-income countries. Second, as mentioned, the storyline of *Climate Action as a Threat to Economic Development* consists of two groups. Interestingly, the group emphasising the need to proceed carefully and slowly – preferably after more research is conducted on potential impacts – consists to 80 percent of high-income countries of which three out of four are OPEC members. In contrast, the group calling for strong action that takes developmental aspects into account is to 80 percent made up of low- and lower-middle income countries.

In relation to the negotiation coalitions, the LDCs show a high degree of convergence, with three quarters or more expressing the storylines of non-state action, security threats, and empowerment of the vulnerable. These storylines as well as *Equitable Climate Action* are also expressed by two thirds or more of ALBA and AILAC members. The AOSIS and SIDS coalitions (which largely comprise the same states)
converge on the storylines of non-state action and urgency but are divided regarding the Equitable Climate Action storyline, which is articulated by about one third of the coalition members. The remaining coalitions converge on the two most common storylines as these are expressed by almost all parties included in the analysis. Aside from this, the traditional coalitions do not present clear patterns of convergence among the NDCs analysed here but are more or less scattered across a variety of storylines.

Mapping each discourse coalition on a world map shows that also geographical proximity is not irrelevant to consider for some regions (Figs. 2–5). For instance, the storylines of Tapping the Potential of Non-State Climate Action and Climate Change as an Urgent Security Threat are expressed by all seven Southern Asian countries. We also see that 95 percent of Sub-Saharan countries emphasise non-state action, while a majority (between 61 and 93 percent) of Latin American and Caribbean countries articulate storylines on non-state action, urgency, empowerment of vulnerable groups, and equity (see Figs. 3–4). Interestingly, Ukraine adheres to none of the storylines and India to all of them (Figs. 2–5).

6. Discussion

This paper has demonstrated that states adhere to different – and often multiple – climate governance storylines, creating discourse coalitions that do not fully coincide with geopolitical patterns. The storylines indicate that almost all the NDCs examined are informed by liberal environmentalism (Bernstein, 2001). Of the majority of the NDCs, the foundational principles of the liberal world order are left unchallenged while the belief in win-win opportunities in climate change is widespread. This is particularly evident in the almost universal storyline of The Promise of Decarbonisation. These positions clearly resonate with other identifications of dominant environmental policy discourses such as Ecological Modernization, Cooperative Reformism, and Mainstream Sustainability, which assert the compatibility of economic and material growth with the attainment of sustainability (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2006; Hajer, 1995; Stevenson, 2015; Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). The equally near-universal storyline of Mending the Climate Through Natural Resource Management corresponds to ideas of human stewardship of nature and the optimisation of natural systems captured in the discourse of Green Governmentality (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007).

The three storylines emphasising non-state action, empowerment of the vulnerable, and equity, express diverging forms of liberal environmentalism. Similar to reformist Civic Environmentalism and Expansive Sustainability (see Section 3), the first portrays non-state actor involvement as a way of enhancing environmental governance. The second attempts to empower women and other vulnerable groups within existing social structures, i.e. without fundamentally changing the order that arguably made the groups vulnerable in the first place. Hence, this storyline is not an expression of the ecofeminist discourse that envisions an overthrow of patriarchal structures that put women in inferior positions. Rather, it reproduces a discourse of continuous economic growth while dealing with climate change, at the same time aiming to even out inequalities and empower weaker segments of society, similar to Equitable Modernization (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). Reassembling reformist Civic Environmentalism (see Section 3), the third similarly seeks to circumvent inequalities and climate injustices by taking it into account in decision-making. What these diverging ideas have in common is their call for an adjustment of the...
current liberal order, without fundamentally challenging it. They do not voice structural critique and thus differ from the more radical climate justice discourse that has gained ground in recent years.

In contrast to these corrections of the liberal economic order, the storyline of System Change, Not Climate Change contains critique of the very system. The storyline taps into multiple previously identified environmental policy discourses: Limits, which underlines the impossibility of perpetual growth on a finite planet, as well as Green Radicalism, radical Civic Environmentalism, and Radical Transformationism (see Section 3), which all voice structural critique and call for systemic changes.

Juxtaposed with the win-win rhetoric is the storyline that emphasises the urgency of climate action. While the above storylines to a large extent reflect the formerly identified environmental policy discourses,
this storyline is not prominent in previous literature. This indicates that climate change as a security threat is a relatively new and growing concern. The fact that more than half of the parties included in this analysis articulate this storyline is striking and suggests that it will affect the international conversation on climate change governance in the years to come. Notably, one party (Venezuela) emphasised that climate change should not be securitised, indicating that attempts at a securitising discursive framing may be contentious.

So, how should we understand the fact that only non-Annex I countries articulate the storylines emphasising empowerment of the vulnerable, equity, climate action as a threat to economic development, and systemic change? Whereas only India expresses all four of these, different combinations of these storylines were expressed by 47 countries, whereof 40 included both Empowering the Vulnerable and Equitable Climate Action.
Climate Action.

We see that this can be understood in two primary ways. It may be due to Annex I in general submitting their intended NDCs early, thus keeping them relatively short without much contextualisation. Also, the EU’s contribution represented a compromise between the 28 members and had to shy away from elements that were potentially controversial. Many aspects of climate policy may also be taken for granted by richer countries. For example, non-state initiatives are an integral part of climate action in the North and South (see for example Bäckstrand et al., 2017; Kuypers et al., 2018), yet are only mentioned by five Annex I countries, against 109 from the South. This can be understood as non-state action being taken for granted by Annex I countries or being framed as distinct from state-guarded actions.

Another way to understand the difference in storyline distribution may be that it is among those who consider themselves disadvantaged by the liberal economic world order that we can expect to see discursive struggles. The alternative storylines can be seen as points of diffraction, where liberal discourse contains elements that are incompatible, and may – as evident in the System Change, Not Climate Change storyline – gather together states with similar critique but diverging interests. In resisting dominating discourses, storylines, which reduce problem complexity (Hajer, 1995), can converge and provide bridges for dialogue and contestation or synergies (Peola and Jaworska, 2018; Longhurst et al., 2016). Further, long-standing issues of lack of trust between the North and South in the post-colonial era (Linnér & Jacob, 2005, Gupta 2015) may well leave its imprint not only on discursive formations but also on the alliances forged for some time after the actual economic positions of countries have changed.

7. Conclusions

While most countries share the liberal economic discourse, on closer examination we have identified points of diffraction in the storylines and tensions that could give rise to conflict in further negotiations under the Paris Agreement. The hybrid design of the Paris Agreement constitutes an attempt to resolve or avoid some of the long-standing conflicts on, for instance, division of labour and responsibility. The Agreement also institutionalises mechanisms, such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and Loss and Damage, in order to mitigate some of the potential conflict areas. While the GCF could address concerns highlighted under the storyline of Climate Action as a Threat to Economic Development, Loss and Damage addresses concerns pertaining to the view of Climate Change as an Urgent Security Threat. Nevertheless, some of the contested issues in the GCF are what types of projects to fund and whether development projects are eligible for funding (Amerasinghe and Thwaites, 2019). Similarly, negotiations on Loss and Damage have centred on the legal character of such a mechanism and the types of damages that should be compensated (Serdarzyn, 2017). Resolving these issues and realising the mechanisms’ potentials as conflict-mitigators bring discursive struggles over what constitutes the problem to be remedied to the fore. Another such move towards resolving discursive struggles is the Talanoa Dialogue, which aims to create an ‘inclusive, participatory, and transparent dialogue […] to share stories [and] build empathy’ among parties and non-state actors (UNFCCC, 2018b). This shows that there is a perceived need to move beyond technicalities and focus on underlying issues of meaning-making and increase the understanding for how different actors construe climate change challenges.

We conclude that geographical proximity and income groupings give some insight into why some NDCs articulate diverging storylines and why they are non-issues for other countries. This paper shows, however, that the formation of discourse coalitions cannot be understood solely through comparison with negotiation coalitions, geography, and income group. Searches for patterns of convergence between the discourse coalitions identified here and factors such as material preconditions, Human Development Index ranking, or newly emerging negotiation coalitions (for instance, the High Ambition Coalition) could provide further insights into how the post-Paris geopolitical landscape is reflected in the NDCs.

The analysis shows that traces of the radical critique of the liberal economic world order brought out through NIEO can be found in the System Change, Not Climate Change storyline that brings together some of the emerging giants, even if they are modest in number. To some extent, NIEO ideas also emerge in the storylines that emphasise the particularly vulnerable and the importance of equity. While draped in a more ‘liberal’ form, it is noteworthy that many developing countries seem to envision their future development differently to the western way. This indicates that there are tensions in the liberal discourse and that Bernstein’s assertion that radical critique was dissolved in the 1990s does not fully hold in the post-Paris landscape.

At a point in global climate governance that the UNFCCC Executive Secretary refers to as ‘the time for implementation and action’ (UNFCCC, 2016), it is imperative to further our understanding of the discourses that underlie action and highlight potential differences. As was apparent at COP23 in 2017 (Fridahl et al., 2017; Jayaraman, 2017), materialising the aspirational goals of the Paris Agreement is not necessarily just a question of implementation; it is about agreeing on a joint problem description along with appropriate avenues for action, in the light of which discursive differences will surface. If we are to materialise long-term goals of societal transformation, expressed in relation to both the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, discourse analysis can aid our understanding of where divisions lie and highlight the reasons for negotiation difficulties in the post-Paris landscape of international cooperation on climate governance.

Declaration of interests

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council Formas through the project “A Global Potlatch: Cross-national patterns of state engagement and performance in the new landscape of international climate cooperation” (Grant No 2011-779) and The Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research – Mistra through the research programme “Mistra Geopolitics”.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Lazare Nzeiyimana and Claudia Strambo for their excellent assistance in the analysis of the NDCs in French and Spanish, respectively, and Lotten Wåhlin for her valuable assistance with the GIS-based maps. We also wish to thank Eva Lövbrand, the Green Room: The Environmental Humanities Collaboratory seminar and the participants at the panel Earth system governance in turbulent times - Climate Coalitions at the Earth System Governance Conference 2017 for very valuable suggestions.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2019.01.006.

References


