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Fit for purpose? Just Energy Transition Partnerships and accountability in international climate governance

Joseph Earsom

ESPOL-LAB, Université Catholique de Lille, Lille, France

Correspondence
Joseph Earsom, ESPOL-LAB, Université Catholique de Lille, Lille, France.
Email: joseph.earsom@univ-catholille.fr

Abstract
This contribution examines whether just energy transition partnerships (JETPs), a new type of financial agreement between G7/G7-allies and low-to-middle income states, can serve as accountability mechanisms for the United Nation Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It identifies important structural elements from the existing literature on climate governance for holding actors to account and then assesses the extent to which they are present within JETPs. While JETPs appear in theory to offer increased potential to shore up accountability in the UNFCCC, the case of the South African JETP demonstrates that the presence of these structural elements is likely insufficient to ensure accountability vis-à-vis the UNFCCC. This preliminary analysis therefore finds several practical limitations to accountability within JETPs and dense governance spaces in general. It thus points to the importance of identifying the underlying conditions needed for institutional accountability structures to function as designed.

1 | LOOKING BEYOND THE UNFCCC

As part of the historic 2015 Paris Agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), states pledged to limit global warming to maximum 2°C, while striving for 1.5°. To do so, they agreed on a system of nationally-determined contributions (NDCs) in which states put forward voluntary pledges of greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reduction targets every 5 years. While states are required to submit updated NDCs, they enjoy significant leeway in setting the associated level of ambition (Allan et al., 2021). Moreover, although the Paris Agreement was widely heralded as a creative way to break the gridlock that had long plagued international climate politics, global GHG emissions continue to rise at an alarming rate. As of 2022, current NDCs were roughly compatible with 2.5° of warming by the end of the century (UNFCCC Secretariat, 2022). Despite agreement at the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) in 2021 in Glasgow on the need to strengthen NDCs and national climate plans, only 24 states out of the 193 total UNFCCC parties had done so in advance of COP27.

Over the past decades, the UNFCCC has developed a robust standard-setting apparatus—a function that extant literature identifies as a pre-condition for holding states to account (Grant & Keohane, 2005). Via its relationship with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and its own internal functioning, it has delineated what NDCs and commitments are necessary to meet climate temperature targets. Furthermore, the Paris Agreement includes a framework and expectations around reporting both NDCs and actual emissions reductions. The UNFCCC has thus also developed expertise in monitoring the extent to which states honour their NDCs. However, the UNFCCC largely lacks the ability to rebuke states that fail to meet their NDCs or other commitments. In that regard, it cannot by itself carry out all the necessary functions to ensure accountability, which in the traditional sense is understood as the ability for some actors to hold other actors responsible for their actions or commitments to agreed standards (Biermann & Gupta, 2011; Grant

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& Keohane, 2005; Koenig-Archibugi, 2010). Although this accountability gap limits the effectiveness of the UNFCCC as a governance institution, the gap is not surprising. Such a pledge-based system reflects the institutional and geopolitical context from which the Paris Agreement was born (Allan et al., 2021). Hence, actors—state or otherwise—looking to hold UNFCCC parties to account and thereby help facilitate GHG emissions reductions must look outside the UNFCCC itself for mechanisms to do so.

Indeed, although the UNFCCC remains the de-facto hub for state and non-state action on climate change, the broader international regime complex on climate change presents opportunities for catalysing climate action and potentially holding states to account for their UNFCCC-related commitments (Earsom & Delreux, 2021). The climate literature has identified potential accountability mechanisms within this context, both intergovernmental and based on the increasing involvement of non-state and sub-national actors. However, while extant work provides a broad topography of potential types of initiatives that complement the UNFCCC (Bäckstrand et al., 2018; Biermann & Gupta, 2011), there has been less work assessing the complicated question of how specific accountability mechanisms may work in practice across the international regime complex on climate change. This piece therefore seeks to shed light on how climate accountability mechanisms function across the regime complex (i.e. that feed back into the UNFCCC). In doing so, it fits with the theme of the special section that seeks to move our understanding of accountability beyond single institutions.

Recently, just energy transition partnerships (JETPs) have received significant attention as potential accountability solutions (Houston & Ruppel, 2022). JETPs are financial agreements between G7 and G7-allied countries and specific low-to-middle income countries that are traditionally heavily-dependent on coal. The partnerships focus on mobilising public and private financial resources to facilitate the decarbonisation of the local economy (Houston & Ruppel, 2022; Suharsono & Maulidia, 2023). As of mid-2023, JETPs have been signed with South Africa, Indonesia, Senegal and Vietnam. JETPs are increasingly viewed as a scalable solution for encouraging developing countries to meet and exceed their commitments in the UNFCCC. This contribution therefore examines the extent to which JETPs could function as accountability mechanisms for the UNFCCC while also identifying associated practical limitations. To do so, it examines the literature on accountability in climate governance to highlight elements that have been identified as important for holding actors to account and then assesses the extent to which they are present with the JETPs. It finds that JETPs theoretically offer a potential to increase accountability in the UNFCCC, thanks to their complementary nature, formal secretariat, established coordination platforms and inclusive structure. However, the South African case demonstrates that these structural elements are likely insufficient by themselves.

2 | EXISTING LITERATURE ON CLIMATE ACCOUNTABILITY

The complexity of international climate governance is well-established (Keohane & Victor, 2011). Notably, the 'Cambrian explosion' of fora and implicated actors, both public and private, has meant that the climate change regime complex can be characterised by intergovernmental and transnational levels (Bäckstrand et al., 2018; Widerberg & Pattberg, 2017). The intergovernmental level encompasses the interaction among governments on climate-related issues, while the transnational level refers to non-state actors: civil society, sub-national governments and business. Yet, the borders between these levels are becoming increasingly blurred thanks in part to the Paris Agreement (Widerberg et al., 2019). Work on accountability in climate governance readily acknowledges the two levels and associated challenges but largely approaches them separately (Bäckstrand et al., 2018; Park & Kramarz, 2019). However, as the framing paper shows, this understanding of accountability is not necessarily compatible in such a complex governance context (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2023). Rather, accountability within densely institutionalised governance spaces is likely better served by 'forward-looking' mechanisms, such as creating added value, encouraging collaboration and including implicated actors (state or otherwise). Hence, when looking at states' accountability in the UNFCCC, it is necessary to incorporate insights from the intergovernmental and transnational levels.

2.1 | Intergovernmental accountability

This section takes stock of existing scholarship on intergovernmental accountability mechanisms in the context of climate change, with a specific focus on associated limits. With the UNFCCC serving as the established focal forum for international climate governance, the scholarship largely focuses on accountability within the UNFCCC itself or examines how other treaties and informal arrangements can used as accountability mechanisms for the UNFCCC. Indeed, the UNFCCC and its Paris Agreement are strongly reliant on parties' voluntary cooperation to meet agreed temperature targets. Parties' NDCs are regularly reviewed. This process is facilitated via the Global Stocktake, which takes place every 5 years. Although the stocktake reviews parties' collective progress, its individual monitoring

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and review requirements were designed to push parties to gradually strengthen their NDCs (Allan et al., 2021). Thus, the UNFCCC has established itself as a venue of standard-setting and monitoring for states' efforts in GHG emission reductions. Additionally, the UNFCCC's Green Climate Fund (GCF), serves as a funding mechanism to support developing countries with their adaptation and mitigation efforts and thereby help meet their pledges (Chaudhury, 2020).

Despite these arrangements, the UNFCCC largely lacks strong mechanisms that encourage credible commitments, compliance and deter free riding. While the Paris Agreement's structure has transformative potential, its deliberative, peer-reviewed ratcheting system has not yet brought about a dramatic change in ambition (Falkner, 2016; Victor et al., 2022). There is in fact limited answerability for states within the UNFCCC regarding their climate actions (Gupta & van Asselt, 2019). In that regard, much attention has been paid to arrangements outside of the UNFCCC proper in which actors are encouraged to meet climate commitments, either by sanction or incentivisation. Two notable examples include climate-related clauses in preferential trade agreements (PTAs) and 'climate clubs'.

PTAs have been portrayed as bilateral or minilateral solutions for holding actors accountable on climate-related issues, including NDCs (Laurens et al., 2022). Here, this entails establishing an institutional linkage between favourable trading conditions and climate action under the UNFCCC. The literature demonstrates that PTAs can incentivise states to comply with their climate-related commitments at the risk of being sanctioned or deprived of the benefits of the PTA, notably via dispute mechanisms (Morin & Jinnah, 2018). However, they often lack legal teeth and tend to reflect trade dispute considerations as opposed to specific climate concerns (Blümer et al., 2019; Laurens et al., 2022; Morin & Jinnah, 2018). Additionally, while climate-ambitious developed states are increasingly utilising PTAs as accountability tools, developing states may see them as a hindrance to economic development and thus be hesitant to use them (Laurens et al., 2022). This also raises questions of asymmetric imposition and its eventual impact on power differentials, which could undermine cooperation. Today, the use of PTAs for climate accountability remains modest.

Climate clubs, or smaller groupings of actors meeting outside the UNFCCC in a setting with developed targets and conditions for membership, have also been seen as a way to overcome inertia within the UNFCCC (Falkner, 2016; Green, 2017). The term climate club has remained relatively vague, with a variety of formats proposed, including them serving as smaller negotiating fora, accountability hubs and sources of legitimacy for the UNFCCC. Falkner et al. (2022) take stock of these propositions and identify three main categories: clubs based around shared norms, bargaining or transformative potential. From an accountability perspective, transformative clubs have the most potential to compensate for the lack of sanctioning in the UNFCCC, as they can create incentives for states to join them and follow their rules, either via the promise of exclusive benefits in exchange for compliance or sanctioning in the absence of compliance. The European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism is one potential example of a transformative club. Concerns have emerged around its legal framework and apparent outsized impact on developing states, which could ultimately impact its utility as an accountability mechanism (Falkner et al., 2022).

Recent analysis suggests that while clubs, like PTAs, offer a potential for incentivising decarbonisation—and therefore facilitating accountability with commitments in the UNFCCC—their use is quite limited in scope, with thus far largely unenforceable sanctions (Falkner et al., 2022). Furthermore, based on the current constellation of interests within international climate politics, it appears that an incentive-based 'added value' club, in which members receive a particular side benefit (such as technology transfer or cost sharing), would be the most likely to succeed, as opposed to sanctioning which would likely result in trade disputes and questions of inequity (Falkner, 2016). Moreover, Victor et al. (2022) note the role that these institutions can play in reinforcing the NDC system by encouraging collaboration, capacity building and dialogue.

2.2 | Transnational accountability

While the literature on accountability at the intergovernmental level largely focuses on sanctioning and incentivising mechanisms, the literature at the transnational level mainly focuses on the challenges of achieving accountability within a dense and multi-level institutional context. It is also relatively normative in nature, proposing a broad framework based around inclusive participation, transparency, dialogue and peer learning (Bäckstrand et al., 2018; Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017).

The existing scholarship is resoundingly clear that the overlapping nature of many transnational initiatives and the simultaneous presence of different types of public and private actors challenges standard-setting, monitoring and sanctioning, as well as legitimacy and transparency (Park & Kramarz, 2019; Widerberg et al., 2019; Widerberg & Pattberg, 2017). Accordingly, it underscores the absence of a 'one-size-fits-all' solution for accountability mechanisms vis-à-vis transnational actors and their various pledges and commitments across the regime complex (Widerberg & Pattberg, 2017). It stresses the need for 'a more horizontal mode of operating that includes mutual monitoring and review, peer accountability and transparency', with an orchestrating role

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for states and international organisations (Bäckstrand et al., 2018, p. 344). This literature appears to support a forward-looking approach to accountability, which fits with a broader reflection on whether or not current accountability mechanisms actually contribute to solving global environmental problems (Park & Kramarz, 2019).

Scholars and practitioners alike have advocated for the UNFCCC to serve as a hub and host for the monitoring framework, and potentially even standard-setting, in order to facilitate accountability for non-state actors. Its close work with non-party stakeholders (including business, civil society and sub-national actors) via the Paris Agreement provides it with legal and normative legitimacy for setting expectations on the level of ambition necessary for those actors beyond states themselves to combat climate change. Secretariats can help facilitate accountability for non-state actors via the development of detailed guidelines, expectations and a pledging platform conducive to monitoring and deliberation (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017; Ocampo & Gómez-Arteaga, 2016). Yet, existing efforts within the UNFCCC under what has become its Global Climate Action Portal have been thus far unsuccessful in ensuring accountability (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017; Chan et al., 2022). Despite increased scrutiny from the UNFCCC secretariat and increased learning among transnational actors, Chan et al. (2022) do not find evidence of their increased effectiveness in contributing to climate targets. Accountability thus remains elusive.

3 | JETPs

Overall, the literature on climate accountability points away from sanctioning as an effective strategy and instead underscores the importance of value creation, collaboration and the inclusion of implicated actors, whether state or non-state. This fits with the focus of this special section, notably its emphasis or pluralist accountability (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2023). This section therefore assesses the extent to which these elements appear to be present within the current JETP framework. The objective is not to make a definitive judgement of the JETPs but rather to provoke discussion and critical reflection on a new model of cooperation that has been heralded as a panacea for accountability in states' efforts towards decarbonisation.

The first JETP was launched at COP26 in 2021 between South Africa, as the beneficiary country, and France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union. The group of funders, known as the International Partners Group (IPG), has now expanded to also include Canada, Denmark, Italy, Japan and Norway. In establishing JETPs, the IPG aims to support 'developing and implementing a country-led, accelerated, sustainable and socially just energy transition that contributes to net zero emissions, strengthened NDCs, and sustainable societies and economies that are aligned with the Paris Agreement' (German Federal Ministry for the Environment, 2022, p. 25). The JETPs offer a combination of grants, guarantees and favourable loans. However, they differ from traditional climate finance in that they represent a concrete commitment from a group of ambitious industrialised countries to support decarbonisation and take a more holistic, systematic approach to financial support, instead of the traditional project level (Falkner et al., 2022; Hege et al., 2022). Yet, the lion's share of financing thus far hinges on loans, raising questions of conditionality and power differentials which have characterised climate finance debates for the past several decades (Chaudhury, 2020). Nonetheless, the JETPs appear to be structured in a way that favours value creation, collaboration and the inclusion of implicated actors, offering potential for increased accountability vis-à-vis the UNFCCC.

As the JETP model remains quite new, this piece looks specifically at the JETP with South Africa, as it is the most developed framework thus far. The $8.5 billion South African JETP (of which 4% is grants) has the primary objective of decarbonising the South African electricity system in order for South Africa to meet its NDC, while also facilitating a just transition for those aspects of the economy impacted by the movement away from coal (South Africa et al., 2021). As for the specific benefits for South Africa, it offers financing to which the government would not have easy access on the financial markets, thereby facilitating investment and green transformation that might not otherwise be possible. The South African Government and IPG partners contend this offers the potential to revolutionise the South African economy, provide green jobs and raise standards in the country. Thus, it provides a clear added value to South Africa, of which the byproduct is meeting the NDC (Houston & Ruppel, 2022).

At first glance, the South African JETP includes structural elements that the aforementioned literature suggests are, at a minimum, sufficient for increased accountability. In other words, the presence of these structural elements—a long-term cooperative arrangement, a joint secretariat, coordination platforms and stakeholder involvement mechanisms—should theoretically be conducive to 'forward-looking' accountability (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni & Hofmann, 2023).

First, the JETP's design as a long-term cooperative arrangement, as opposed to a single project-based endeavour, is likely a necessary pre-condition for accountability (Ocampo & Gómez-Arteaga, 2016). The JETP serves as an institutional venue that can assist one set of actors (here, the IPG) in holding another actor (here, South Africa) to account in meeting their NDC, by means of a partnership and without developing conflicting expectations or standards. Without such a

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structure, it would indeed be very difficult to continually complement the UNFCCC, which itself is a long-term framework. Indeed, at the international level, such an arrangement is not unique. The GCF's mitigation-based funding instruments have a similar logic. However, the GCF's funding instruments are primarily project-based, with recent research finding limited long-term involvement and ownership from national actors in GCF projects (Chaudhury, 2020; Omukuti et al., 2022).

The second structural element is the presence of a joint secretariat. The South African JETP includes the establishment of a joint secretariat between the IPG and the South African Presidential Climate Finance Task Force that provides for regular discussion and close management of the platform (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2022; UK Cabinet Office, 2022). Thus, there is built-in potential for informal and formal engagement and the transmission of learnings and expectations. The Secretariat could serve as a focal point for institutionalised oversight while also facilitating collaboration and exchange by diffusing new practices and ideas. Such functions are a hallmark of generating increased accountability among implicated actors (Bäckstrand & Kuyper, 2017). The Secretariat has thus far undertaken consultations with IPG and local South African partners. It has also convened five thematic working groups bringing together experts on topics such as finance, power and implementation, among others (Imelda, 2023; Suharsono & Maulidia, 2023). At the same time, the work of the Secretariat, which is housed within the South African Department of Mineral Resources and Energy, has been hampered by staff departures and internal conflict within the South African Government (NHQUANG & Associates, 2023; Seiler et al., 2023; Sguazzin & Burkhardt, 2023). While its structure and early activities have the potential to facilitate oversight and exchange, it is unclear the extent to which the Secretariat has actually been able to do so.

The third structural element is that the JETP explicitly calls for the establishment of coordination platforms to identify key opportunities and challenges and accompany the project, including a *Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Framework* (Lüpke et al., 2023; South Africa et al., 2021). In that respect, the JETP could facilitate 'real time' accountability mechanisms based around deliberation and including elements of monitoring, dialogue and exchange on an ongoing basis. Such mechanisms have been notably hard to implement within other mechanisms, like the GCF, in which it has been very difficult to gain visibility into the actual outputs and outcomes of specific projects, despite the presence of safeguards and evaluation procedures (Omukuti et al., 2022). The JETP's national-level monitoring framework was put into place in 2023, making an evaluation of its effectiveness difficult (NHQUANG & Associates, 2023; Suharsono & Maulidia, 2023). Nonetheless, two developments stand out. First, non-governmental stakeholders and civil society groups have complained of a lack of transparency within the process and worry that such promises of collaboration and engagement will not be kept (Lüpke et al., 2023; Wemanya & Adow, 2022). Second, recent research from Mirzania et al. (2023) reiterates the lack of transparency while also noting the absence of monitoring in the transition towards renewable energy, despite official criteria and frameworks in place within South Africa. These developments could call into question its effectiveness, considering that transparency is a precondition for accountability (Gupta & van Asselt, 2019).

The final structural element is the implication of stakeholders. The South African JETP declaration and implementing documents stress an important role for impacted stakeholders at all levels. The declaration, issued at COP26, specifically emphasises the importance of tailoring a package to South Africa's 'nationally determined' efforts and 'local value chains' (South Africa et al., 2021). Furthermore, as part of the launch, the South African Government endeavoured to conduct a stakeholder consultation and establish various working groups to identify opportunities for financing and create an ongoing system for dialogue and monitoring (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2022). Indeed, the inclusion of implicated stakeholders improves monitoring and can increase pressure on actors to meet their commitments, thereby helping to facilitate accountability (Widerberg et al., 2019). However, civil society groups have again strongly criticised this process, arguing that key NGOs in South Africa's green transition have been excluded (Tyler & Mgoduso, 2022; Wemanya & Adow, 2022). This fits again with larger research on South Africa's energy transition which finds that 'the underlying issue remains a lack of community participation in developing and implementing renewable energy projects' (Mirzania et al., 2023, p. 14). This lack of inclusion could thus have negative implications, as there is less pressure for accountability from those impacted by the project. Without stakeholders, particularly those experienced NGOs, present throughout the process, there could be less pressure on the South African Government and IPG to ensure that the JETP does what it set out to do.

Overall, the JETP's complimentary nature to the UNFCCC, its formal secretariat, established coordination platforms and inclusive structure appear to fit with what the literature finds sufficient for effective accountability within international climate governance. Thus, we would expect these elements to facilitate exchange and collaboration leading to increased compliance with UNFCCC NDCs. However, as this preliminary analysis suggests, the mere presence of these elements is likely insufficient for increased accountability in the UNFCCC. As we have seen, many limitations have emerged in practice.

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4 | CONCLUSION

This piece has examined the challenges and opportunities associated with accountability within international climate governance. Notably, it underscores the limited utility of backward-looking sanctioning and instead points to the importance of creating added value, encouraging collaboration and including implicated actors. In that regard, JETPs at first glance appear to offer a path-breaking approach to helping low- and middle-income states meet their NDCs in the UNFCCC. Importantly, JETPs do not seek to replicate or compete with the UNFCCC, but rather complement it. In theory, the formal secretariat, established coordination platforms and inclusive structure could indeed create a network dynamic in which all implicated actors communicate, track each other's work, and learn and adapt their behaviour accordingly. That being said, the South African case clearly demonstrates that the structural design of the JETP, while innovative, is unlikely by itself to drive increased accountability in the UNFCCC. Hence, this contribution underscores the practical limitations of inter-institutional accountability.

Accordingly, it points to the importance of identifying additional conditions that may need to be present in order to trigger increased accountability, both with respect to the JETPs and densely institutionalised governance spaces in general. We need to identify the conditions that allow the structural elements to function in a way that triggers increased accountability. While this contribution has looked at questions of accountability from a strictly institutional perspective, it is essential, especially within the context of JETPs and international climate finance, to consider how underlying questions of conditionality, control and equity shape parties' and stakeholders' involvement and overall engagement. Indeed, it is this engagement that then likely shapes their participation within the structural elements that can trigger processes of dialogue, learning and mutual adjustmen—hallmarks of forward-looking accountability. Future research should therefore examine in greater detail the formulation and implementation of JETPs around the world. In doing so, we can draw more transversal observations on the utility of JETPs and the extent to which they depart from the status quo of international climate governance.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Joseph Earsom https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4636-788X

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Joseph Earsom is Associate Professor of Environmental and Climate Change Policy at the European School of Political and Social Sciences, Université Catholique de Lille. His research interests include bureaucratic politics, climate diplomacy, EU climate policy, international negotiations and regime complexity.

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