
Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

BUSINESS 4 CLIMATE – REPORT 2025

# How to move business for ambitious climate action: The future role of business coalitions

# Content



# Executive Summary

Climate change presents a defining challenge for the global economy. Governments alone cannot deliver the scale and speed of transformation required to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Businesses – through their investments, innovations, and influence – have become indispensable actors in driving climate ambition. Yet, the effectiveness of their engagement increasingly depends on how they collaborate, negotiate, and mobilise through collective platforms such as business coalitions.

**PURPOSE AND SCOPE**
This report analyses how sustainability-oriented business coalitions negotiate and mobilise to advance ambitious climate policy. It forms part of CEMUNE's Business4Climate (B4C) project, which seeks to deepen the understanding of collective business action as a driver of change and ambition. This report explores how business coalitions

- align diverse corporate interests,
- develop internal structures and organisational processes,
- navigate the evolving political landscape that shapes climate policy outcomes.

Through the lens of negotiation theory, our analysis focuses on both internal and external dimensions of coalition dynamics. Internally, we explore how coalitions coordinate, sustain member commitment, and balance competing priorities and organisational structures. Externally, we assess how these coalitions engage with governments and civil society to influence policy design and foster greater climate ambition.

Our study draws on 27 expert interviews with practitioners from business, government, and civil society, complemented by a network analysis of coalition membership. In addition, we collected publicly available data on memberships within the We Mean Business Coalition as a case study. Ultimately, this report aims to strengthen the contribution of businesses and business coalitions to effective, ambitious and inclusive climate governance. We provide suggestions on how to enhance the strategic alignment and impact of business coalitions, by emphasising the role of negotiations.

**FINDINGS**
Our findings highlight how business coalitions have evolved from voluntary, advocacy-oriented networks into complex negotiation arenas that shape corporate climate ambition. The internal and external negotiation dynamics of these coalitions reveal both opportunities and constraints for more effective collective action.

**1. Clear positioning on climate objectives can attract supportive members.**
Coalitions with a clear strategy and minimum membership criteria, such as targets aligned with the Science Based Target initiative (SBTi), build legitimacy and trust, but often attract similar types of companies. Strategic clarity and regional attractiveness are key to secure a large, diverse membership base, while maintaining alignment around the common goals.

**2. Managing internal multi-stakeholder negotiations is crucial, as the member-base strongly influences actions and narratives of coalitions.**
The composition of coalitions strongly shapes coalition direction and outcomes. Effective negotiation management, balancing member-driven and secretariat-driven agendas, is essential to build consensus and sustain ambition across diverse corporate interests.

**3. Geographical fragmentation of climate policy is testing business coalitions' ability to adapt their strategic focus, allocate resources and coordinate multi-stakeholder management.**
As climate governance shifts from global to regional levels, business coalitions face a growing tension between global coherence and local relevance. They must adapt strategies, allocate resources efficiently, and coordinate across multi-level networks to remain influential.

**4. Flexible and solution-oriented forms of (ad-hoc) collaboration create opportunities to solve sector-specific (and regional) challenges.**
Creating specialised, data-driven and solution-oriented settings, can be an opportunity for coalitions to enhance their impact. This setting requires coordination and collaboration and thus needs strong leadership.

**5. Creating more options for agreement can improve coalitions' role as intermediaries for diverse societal actors.**
By engaging constructively with NGOs, trade associations, and unions, business coalitions can broaden their influence and model pathways for compromise. Coalitions need to understand varying interests to help create more flexible options for agreement.

**6. Support in internal negotiations and scaling of innovation enhances coalitions' transformative role for members**
Coalitions have the potential to become catalysts for internal corporate change by supporting cross-departmental dialogue – from finance to marketing – and integrating sustainability into core business decisions. This expands their role from capacity building to transformative impact.

**7. Business coalitions are challenged to balance shielding member interests and providing platforms for positive policy engagement**
Amid the ESG backlash and "greenhushing", coalitions increasingly act as trusted advocates, managing public narratives and political risk on behalf of members. They balance transparency with discretion, shifting towards strategic, behind-the-scenes influence in climate policy.

## OUTLOOK AND WAY FORWARD

The insights from this report aim to help business coalitions and their members advocate more effectively for ambitious climate action, while also informing public sector and civil society actors on how to collaborate with progressive businesses. To enhance the impact and resilience of these coalitions, they could (1) clearly define goals and roles, (2) strengthen their negotiation management capacities, (3) adapt to a fragmented policy landscape, and (4) reimagine advocacy support under political headwinds.

It is CEMUNE's intention that the results of the first B4C report will be essential reading for CSOs and sustainability managers, coalition leaders as well as future COP Presidency Teams, who – with a better understanding on the current state of play – can use their position to enhance the work of coalitions, e.g. throughout their COP Action Agendas, as well as their impact on multilateral climate negotiations. The next phase of the Business4Climate project will move from analysis to implementation – applying negotiation management expertise to strengthen coordination, policy influence, and measurable impact.

# Introduction

'Tipping points' are a key concept in understanding climate change, usually relating to the crossing of a critical threshold in changing the climate system. However, scientists and practitioners increasingly focus on tipping points that surpass a technological or economic threshold, for example for electric vehicles or renewable energy. These simultaneously accelerate the global transition needed to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and advance the levels of economic and social development.

Ten years after the Paris Agreement, we have reached some of these socio-economic tipping points: Many companies understand that climate change and its impacts pose significant risks to business operations globally, including potential negative impacts on supply chains, and "88 % of CEOs believe the business case for sustainability is stronger today than five years ago" (UNGC & Accenture, 2025). Today, investment in clean energy is twice as high as in fossil fuels (IEA, 2025). Over the past years, leading businesses have combined voluntary commitments such as net-zero targets, technical action, and policy engagement to reduce emissions and promote stronger climate frameworks at all levels. By leading-by-example, these companies encourage their competitors to follow suit, e.g. in the Race to Zero campaign.

While the Paris Agreement moves towards implementation, the path to sustainable socio-economic tipping points is currently being influenced by what has been labelled "ESG backlash" or "headwinds" and the rise of "greenhushing": Under the influence of political pressure, economic recession and fierce competition, among others, some companies have withdrawn from voluntary commitments, significantly reduced sustainability communication and have started questioning sustainability regulation from reporting to emission trading schemes (Sætra, 2025).

**THE B4C PROJECT**

The Business for Climate project (B4C) is based on CEMUNE's belief and track-record that better negotiations lead to better results. It aims to contribute to better climate policy by researching and supporting businesses that drive governments' climate action, on the global, national or local levels and from or across all sectors, so that government can drive business' climate action.

The project's first phase in 2024 consisted of research and a scientific retreat analysing business engagement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process and beyond. Our research has given us deep insights into barriers and challenges for businesses and their coalitions as well as the potential to foster collaboration and support. Based on these insights, we developed a four-step framework illustrating how effective business-government collaboration can be structured: (1) development of science-based policies, (2) ensure corporate priorities on climate action, (3) joint and public national political climate advocacy and (4) robust national implementation. All four steps are needed to achieve successful implementation and all four can be facilitated through the best possible negotiations. The findings pointed toward the central role of business coalitions broadening corporate actions and aligning interests behind policy recommendations and other forms of collaboration that can help accelerate decarbonization. Given their reach and diversity, coalitions represent one of the most promising levers for advancing ambitious climate policy and fostering coordinated action.

**THIS REPORT**

As with all work the Centre for Multilateral Negotiations (CEMUNE) undertakes, it is essential that the B4C project is rooted in systematic and thorough research. Following the first phase of the project, this report sets out an independent assessment of how business is driving climate action and the policy agenda today.

Driven by the current geopolitical context, where our research shows that many individual companies are more hesitant to speak about climate and sustainability publicly, our research focuses on business coalitions, their actions and impact.

[1] Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) operationalises sustainability development of business by looking at "company's impact on, and vulnerability to, a range of sustainability issues" (Sætra, 2025).

To amplify their influence and align with peers, many businesses increasingly join climate and sustainability coalitions, such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the Corporate Leaders Group, and the Climate Group. These coalitions aim to catalyse "business and policy action [...] and accelerate an inclusive transition to a net zero economy" (We Mean Business Coalition, 2025). Leading corporations such as Volvo, Ørsted, and Unilever, are members of several coalitions. Through their membership, they can reinforce their sustainability commitments, push competitors to similar commitments, and share best practices.

In this research phase, CEMUNE has analysed how business coalitions negotiate and mobilise to foster ambitious climate policy, and how their efforts are shaped by internal alignment, organisational processes, and political context. We explore this question by examining current:

- business-coalitions' set up & network,
- business-coalition and government's interactions,
- challenges within businesses affecting engagement,
- external communications and public advocacy of business coalitions.

Given CEMUNE's expertise in international negotiation management, particular attention is paid to how coalitions negotiate – both internally and externally. Negotiations are not limited to bargaining over interests, but involve building relationships, shaping perceptions, and seeking mutually beneficial solutions. Business coalitions act as negotiating platforms, coordinating interests within the private sector alongside their own aim while engaging with governments, civil society, and international institutions.

The report draws on 27 interviews with practitioners from businesses, governments, civil society and business coalitions. In addition, we collected publicly-available data from coalitions and companies to conduct a stakeholder network analysis. Together, these perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how coalitions function and where their impact could be strengthened. By applying a negotiation lens to business coalitions, the report aims to inform ongoing discussions on how collective corporate action can contribute more effectively to ambitious climate policy.

Our research shows that, in fact, business coalitions and their policy positions are not only driven by (actively engaged) member companies, but also by how coalitions manage the process of finding such positions both internally and with other societal actors. Furthermore, several opportunities for business coalitions arise to strengthen their impact: (1) clearly define goals and roles, (2) strengthen their negotiation management capacities, (3) adapt to a fragmented policy landscape, and (4) reimagine advocacy support under political headwinds.

Coalitions can strengthen their impact and resilience by rethinking advocacy – through advanced negotiation management techniques and strategic adaptation to a polarized and fragmented policy landscape.

Our COP29 and COP30 events at the Goals House discussed findings from our research on the future role of business coalitions.

# Business advocacy for climate action

**THE DUAL DYNAMICS OF BUSINESS ADVOCACY**

Business plays a pivotal role in negotiating and implementing climate policies (Hale, 2016; Møller, 2025). For decades, academic research on business political engagement was dominated by studies of fossil fuel lobbies aiming to obstruct and prevent ambitious government actions at the global, regional, national and sub-national levels (Brulle, 2018; Downie, 2019; Geels, 2014; Levy & Egan, 1998; Stokes, 2020). However, it is also widely recognised that a growing share of businesses have long advocated for stronger government leadership to accelerate decarbonisation (MacPherson et al., 2025). Scholars have observed increasing fragmentation of previously anti-climate corporate interests, and a parallel shift in advocacy toward broader and stronger business support for climate policy (Drahos, 2025; Kennard, 2020; Vormedal et al., 2023). Much academic research has thus turned focus away from studying only negative lobbying towards examining conditions under which business can enable and embolden positive change (Kelsey & Zysman, 2013; Meckling et al., 2015; Vormedal & Meckling, 2023). Nevertheless, corporations are not all transitioning at the same pace, and some still remain opposed to climate action (Marquardt et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2024).

**HOW TECHNOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FORCES SHAPE BUSINESS ADVOCACY**

The rise of climate-supportive business advocacy has been driven by increasing corporate investments in low-carbon technologies, as well as efforts to change existing business models and practices into a more sustainable direction, e.g. through offering more sustainable products, establishing sustainability teams or conducting annual reporting on carbon emissions (Bergek et al., 2013; Berggren et al., 2015; Bohnsack et al., 2020; Steen & Weaver, 2017). Furthermore, the growth of pioneering firms and investors from clean sectors has strongly contributed to re-orienting markets. Thus, from an economic perspective, technological and market changes, including innovation, clean tech cost reductions, scaling, and competition, are likely to continue to expand corporate interests in support of low-carbon transitions. Moreover, institutional investors and directors who engage in climate initiatives can play key roles in catalysing and growing business support for climate action (Lerner & Osgood, 2023; Slager et al., 2023). In the realm of politics, national governments with ambitious decarbonisation goals are likely to drive more businesses to invest in clean alternatives and engage in supportive advocacy. A retreat of governments from climate commitments, on the other hand, can foster reluctance to climate action by carbon-intensive firms and thus increase misalignment (Böhler et al., 2022; Vormedal & Meckling, 2023). This implies that the recent ESG backlash and political headwinds in the US and elsewhere may raise serious challenges to the work of climate-ambitious businesses.

**HOW BUSINESS COALITIONS INFLUENCE CLIMATE POLICY-MAKING**

Existing research provides insights into how business coalitions can influence key actors and advocate effectively within today's complex global governance landscape. Businesses tend to enjoy privileged access to policymakers during international climate summits, offering an opportunity for ambitious business coalitions while also raising questions of issue-capture and equity (Hanegraaff, 2023). Within the UNFCCC conference of the parties (COP) negotiations, business coalitions often use information-based political strategies to successfully influence policymakers (Vormedal, 2008). This may involve assisting decision-makers and providing governments with expert and technical advice in policy formulation (Aplin & Hegarty, 1980; Hillman & Hitt, 1999). Furthermore, like NGOs, business coalitions use information to construct persuasive policy arguments, frame debates, and get issues on the agenda (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). It is therefore crucial for progressive business coalitions to safeguard their missions from divergent corporate priorities and vested interests (MacPherson et al., 2025). Coalitions may be particularly influential when they can demonstrate members' technological power: the technological competencies and innovation capacities that is crucial to designing and implementing climate policies (Vormedal, 2008).

Working together, businesses can thus leverage knowledge and know-how to foster communication and alignment around technological and policy solutions (Axelsson et al., 2024). The We Mean Business Coalition's work in 2015 to help pave the way for the Paris Agreement is a case in point (Howard & Smedley, 2021).

Given the history of negative business lobbying, progressive business coalitions must arguably be judged as both legitimate and trustworthy to be effective. This implies that coalitions must earn the trust of external parties like funders, government officials, the media and the public. Voluntarily disclosing information about members and funding, to address potential conflicts of interest, and being transparent about missions and methods to build confidence about intended impacts, have been highlighted as transparency efforts that could improve effectiveness (Tufano et al., 2023).

Business coalitions hold the key to aligning business within and across key sectors, and recruit the broader business community behind ambitious actions (MacPherson et al., 2025). However, we still know too little about internal and external factors that shape the effectiveness of business advocacy coalitions. How can leading coalitions negotiate between varying interests to mobilise more actors behind advocating for ambitious climate policy? And how does alignment, organisational processes, and current political contexts influence their efforts?

# Methodology

As part of the B4C project, we worked to understand how business coalitions negotiate and mobilize to foster ambitious climate policy using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Combining quantitative, publicly available data and qualitative interview insights allowed us to provide an overview of coalition membership and explanations for challenges and opportunities within the coalitions.

**QUANTITATIVE DATA**

We conducted a stakeholder network analysis to examine current membership structures, partnerships, and representation patterns across major corporate sustainability coalitions. The analysis is based on publicly available data. As a case study, we analysed membership of the six non-profit organisations collaborating under the umbrella of the We Mean Business Coalition. We included Business for Social Responsibility (BSR), World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), the B-Team, the Climate Group (EP100, EV100, RE100), Ceres, and the Corporate Leaders Group (CLG)[2]. In addition to including all companies with at least one membership in the coalitions, we compared these companies with the Fortune 500 (2024) to identify large corporations that do not interact with these coalitions at all. CDP was excluded, although it is part of the core group of We Mean Business partners, as it does not operate on a membership-based model.

In addition to coalition membership, we integrated data from LobbyMap[3][4]. LobbyMap tracks and scores "companies and their industry associations on their climate policy engagement and influence, thus mapping out the corporate climate policy landscape" (LobbyMap, 2025).

Based on this data, we examine the membership structures of business coalitions. First, we show the correlation between the LobbyMap ranking and the number of coalition memberships. Second, we provide a heatmap, showing to what extent companies participation in the six coalitions overlaps.

**QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS**

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 practitioners from businesses, business coalitions, governments and civil society. We reached out to all coalitions within the We Mean Business Coalition and beyond, including to the Exponential Roadmap Initiative or the CEO Alliance of Climate Leaders and more. Secondly, we contacted a wide range of companies ranging from zero coalition memberships to many, from high to low LobbyMap rankings as well as different company sizes. Thirdly, we contacted individuals from the public sector, trade associations, academia, think tanks and civil society who, due to their work and position, are experienced in advocacy and coalition work. This allowed us to capture in-depth, nuanced understandings of the viewpoints of participants on how business coalitions are currently working and how their impact can be improved.

These interviews were manually coded by our researchers to identify themes, patterns and concepts across the different interviews. Through the thematic coding, we identified key challenges coalitions are dealing with and provide concrete, practical guidance on how to improve these networks.

[2] This data was collected in June-August 2025. The Climate Group has renamed EP100 to "Smart Energy Coalition" in October 2025.
[3] Data taken on 10 of July 2025.
[4] Not all companies in the dataset have a LobbyMap ranking.

# Case Study: Mapping of the We Mean Business Coalition Partners

Our case study of the six We Mean Business Coalition (WMBC) core partners – BSR, WBCSD, the B-Team, the Climate Group (EP100, EV100, RE100), Ceres, and CLG – reveals an intriguing pattern: while this network of coalitions presents itself as an engine of corporate climate leadership, their actual set of member companies tells a more complex story beyond companies' practical constraints, such as time and budgets.

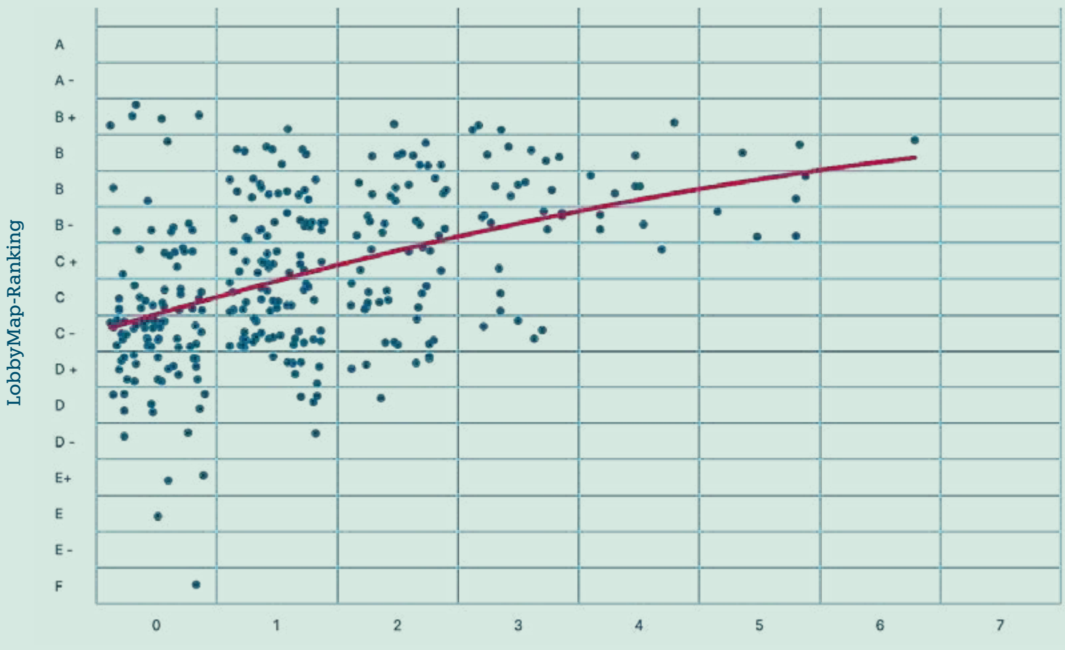
Out of the Fortune 500, a striking 336 companies are not a member of any of these coalitions. This absence is not limited to the expected climate laggards: It does include companies like PBF Energy, which scores an "F" on LobbyMap, but also several frontrunners like Tesla, with a LobbyMap ranking of "B", which actively pushes for strong global electric vehicles and Greenhouse Gas (GHG) policies. This means that there is huge untapped potential – many major players who are already aligned with ambitious climate goals and policy are simply not in these coalitions yet.

Among the companies that are coalition members, the majority have only joined just one coalition. Those who join two or three coalitions often sit in the middle of the climate performance scale, hovering around a "D" rating on LobbyMap. Think of Toyota – a solid example of a company with moderate engagement: involved in both BSR and WBCSD, yet its policy advocacy – according to LobbyMap – still lags behind Paris-aligned pathways.

Then there are the outliers – the true "coalition power users." Unilever, for instance, is a member of nearly every major coalition in the dataset and even participates in others like the WEF Alliance of CEO Climate Leaders and the Exponential Roadmap Initiative. Unsurprisingly, this broad engagement matches their strong policy alignment and LobbyMap Ranking of "B": Unilever publicly supports phasing out fossil fuel subsidies and backs robust energy transition and circular economy regulations.

There is little indication of greenwashing within the coalitions. The graph's bottom-right quadrant – where we would expect to see companies active in multiple coalitions yet resistant to climate action – remains largely empty. A handful of low-scoring firms are present, but they stand out as rare exceptions rather than the norm.

**Coalition memberships and policy engagement**




[5] The Y-axis shows the LobbyMap ranking, with a scale from F to A+, and the X-axis shows the number of climate-coalition memberships, ranging from 0 to 6. Each point represents a company; in total, 316 companies are displayed in the plot.

We did also look at the extent to which membership within coalitions do overlap. The heatmap shows the interconnections of shared corporate membership (Graph Coalition Overlap). Given the rather broad and overlapping goals of the coalitions, one could expect them to attract the same kind of companies: To give an example, the Corporate Leaders Group with its groups for Europe, UK and Africa, aims to bring "together business leaders committed to supporting the transformation to competitive, sustainable, inclusive economies that will deliver net-zero carbon emissions by 2050" and US-focused Ceres aims "to accelerate the transition to a cleaner, more just, and resilient world" – and a total of five companies are a member in both (i.e. 4% and 8% of members overlap).

In total numbers, the highest overlaps exist for Climate Group's RE100, BSR and WBCSD. Given that BSR and WBCSD each have over 200 members, the relative numbers of overlaps with the Climate Group's RE100 and its over 400 members is strikingly low: Only 22% of members from BSR and 23% from WBCSD have also joined RE100's quest for 100% renewable electricity by 2050 and corresponding policy engagement. This picture remains similar for the smaller coalitions, while overlaps are slightly higher within some coalitions of the Climate Group and with BSR and WBCSD. The highest percentage of overlap are the 40% of members of Climate Group's EV100, who are also members of RE100, showing the ability to bring together those intertwined goals around electrification. The 40% of the B-Team members who are also part of WBCSD can mostly be explained by the relatively small number of 20 members in total. Varying total numbers of coalition members (in brackets) and regional focus of e.g. Ceres and CLG, as well as limited resources of time and money in the companies, fall short of explaining the full story.

Firstly, this shows the importance and value of the WMBC as it adds coordination among these coalitions and their members. Secondly, this raises questions about why companies actually join coalitions and what they expect from them. Given the high number of coalitions in the landscape (especially beyond the WMBC), companies must select which ones they join. Yet, this decision may in practice not only be based on strategy, but also on personal relationships or historic networks. Thirdly, it suggests that there is a "diminishing marginal utility" for membership in the many coalitions that exist – i.e. every additional membership adds less and less value.

Coalition Overlaps (%)


6 The heatmap includes only those companies that hold memberships in at least two coalitions (n = 196). Each cell indicates the percentage of companies that share membership in both coalitions. It is to be read from the x- to the y-axis. E.g.: Out of the 264 members of the BSR, 16% are also a member of the WBCSD. And out of the 242 members of the WBCSD, 17% are also a member of the BSR.

# How business coalitions negotiate and mobilize to advance climate policy

Clear positioning on climate objectives can attract supportive members.

Managing internal multi-stakeholder negotiations is crucial, as the member-base strongly influences actions and narratives of coalitions.

Geographical fragmentation of climate policy is testing business coalitions' ability to adapt their strategic focus, allocate resources and coordinate multi-stakeholder management.

Flexible and solution-oriented forms of (ad-hoc) collaboration create opportunities to solve sector-specific (and regional) challenges.

Creating more options for agreement can improve coalitions' role as intermediaries for diverse societal actors.

Support in internal negotiations and scaling of innovation enhances coalitions' transformative role for members

Business coalitions are challenged to balance shielding member interests and providing platforms for positive policy engagement

### 1. Clear positioning on climate objectives can attract supportive members

Based on our case study and interviews, members of business coalitions tend to be in favour of robust climate policy while there is little to no hard blocking by companies. However, the comparison of memberships and LobbyMap rankings does raise questions about the level of ambition and consistency of member's climate advocacy. Interviewees underscored the importance of minimum membership requirements, such as having adopted SBTI-based targets, and reported to have excluded companies from membership due to their continued attempts to water down outcomes – this is both striking as membership fees are typically one of the most important sources of income for coalitions and reasonable due to the coalitions need to be judged as both legitimate and trustworthy. In addition, they did not use this exclusion as a big PR-story, building even more trust among coalition members.

Companies tend to be in a few coalitions, which serve their specific needs, e.g. on capacity building, or fit their strategy, e.g. on policy demands. There are only a few companies that follow an approach of broad membership, most of these being "unconstrained" or "climate-solutionist" businesses from e.g. the consumer goods, technology or renewables sectors (see info box). Interviewees from companies stated they would specifically check coalitions for their strategy, positions and actions, but also who else is a member and how much they could influence coalition positions. In addition, strategic clarity and a theory of change were named an often-missing piece in coalitions. Furthermore, interviewees confirmed that most coalitions and their members, especially those highly engaged, tend to be Western-oriented, cross-sector, multilateral, "unconstrained" or "climate-solutionist" companies. They expressed the need to gather members from other global regions as well as pioneering start-ups and smaller company-sizes. Interestingly, interviewees remained somewhat neutral about (actively) including "carbon-intensive" companies, calling it an ongoing debate without taking a position. Financial actors are rather seen as network partners for action through investment, but less as potential members due to their different positioning and needs.

These findings indicate that while e.g. minimum membership requirements have prevented coalitions from being blocked from the inside, missing strategic clarity and companies' expectations towards coalitions seem to have created a "diminishing marginal utility" for membership in coalitions, i.e. every additional membership adds less and less value. This suggests that a clearer positioning and higher regional attractiveness of coalitions could secure membership from more companies with similar goals as well as from other regions, sizes and sectors. Such a cohesive group would be more aligned on objectives and activities, thereby potentially increasing the coalition's effectiveness and reach.

**INFO BOX**
**Typology of business according to Howard and Smedley (2021)**

1. Carbon-dependant: carbon as a fundamental part, making transition nearly impossible (e.g.: oil & gas)
2. Carbon-intensive: critical reliance on carbon, making transition very costly (e.g.: aviation, automotive, steel)
3. Unconstrained: diverse group of business that can transition without too much effort and costs involved (e.g.: service industry, finance, consumer goods)
4. Climate-solution: growth is based on decarbonisation (e.g.: renewable energy, electric vehicles)

**2. Managing internal multi-stakeholder negotiations is crucial, as the member-base strongly influences actions and narratives of coalitions**

Indeed, having a rather similar member-base is an important observation, as it can affect the coalition dynamic and the internal processes shaping its work. Across the interviews, we identified two main ways in which coalitions organised themselves: "member-driven" and "secretariat-driven". Interviewees explained that in a member-driven approach, (actively engaged) members raise and lead their own topics by e.g. forming working groups or (co-) designing projects that other members can join and participate in, if their interests align. In a secretariat-driven approach, topics are raised by coalition's staff, based on expert knowledge, and tested against their member's interest. While often being highly valuable and well-informed from a sustainability perspective, those topics tend to be harder to deliver joint results as leadership is less clear and support lower. Hence, it is a key task for coalition staff to gather support from (actively engaged) members to ensure that these topics are pushed forward.

Both these approaches are (sometimes simultaneously) followed by coalitions when developing and negotiating policy positions. In this case, coalitions are trying heavily to build consensus on policy demands among members affected (while those unaffected may remain neutral) but struggle to resolve real opposing interest – with carbon removals and markets being a currently highly contested topic due to their cross-cutting relationship with nature, finance, justice and technology topics. This reportedly leads to either agreements on the lowest common denominator or to not articulating a position at all as well as, as a third option, to a group of leading companies moving ahead outside the coalition and with less broad support. In some cases, coalitions report having managed to raise ambition and broaden support through additional science- and databases or through involving non-member companies, by e.g. opening campaigns and open-letters for non-members, especially finance actors as network partners.

The process of developing policy positions, in addition to the importance of member-driven action, underscores how much the member-base influences coalitions' abilities and direction of action. It raises the need for managing internal multi-stakeholder negotiations by deeply understanding corporate interests, applying advanced chairing and mediation techniques and possibly using (AI-driven) alignment tools. Through the facilitation of discussions among members, coalitions can increase their impact, in particular on the member-driven actions.

**3. Geographical fragmentation of climate policy is testing business coalitions' ability to adapt their strategic focus, allocate resources and coordinate multi-stakeholder management.**

Coalitions have arguably celebrated successes regarding major global themes, starting with e.g. the Paris Agreement itself and continuing to the agreement for a transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems at COP28, added by national or regional progress, like the EU Emissions Trading System and other carbon pricing schemes.

While the Paris Agreement moves towards implementation, regional organisations (e.g. the EU), nation states and sub-national bodies are moved to the centre of attention for climate policy. In addition, emerging markets gain economic and political importance. There is no doubt among interviewees that these developments are accelerated by geopolitical fragmentation, as sub-national levels, e.g. California and the C40 Cities, push for robust climate policy, as the impacts of climate change are often more tangible locally. Meanwhile some national and federal levels, namely in the US and Europe hold back and others, e.g. in Asia keep accelerating. Interviewees argue that this has already caused a shift away from a global, one-strategy-fits-all advocacy approach towards more regional and national differentiation by both businesses and coalitions alike. As this approach needs more resources, both companies and business coalitions define and concentrate on focus markets. For companies, this often leads to a focus on their (western) home countries, their biggest markets and emerging economies. Company-interviewees report making key markets with strong policy signals, like China, their commercial focus. Emerging markets with weaker policy signals but a willingness to advance are central to showcase and learn from as pilot projects, which then inform further policy demands.

For global business coalitions, this causes a dilemma on where and how to focus. Newly defined focus markets by coalitions and members may not overlap. Additionally, interviewees from coalitions state they do depend on regional, national or subnational partners ranging from loose network partners to crucial implementation bodies. Often, national partners exist, but are not tightly and formally linked to the global coalitions and have separate membership structures. Connecting or steering these partners and their members towards common goals of (global) members becomes a negotiation challenge in itself.

**INFO BOX**

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) are national climate action plans under the Paris Agreement that define each country's commitments to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change. They form the core mechanism for implementing the Agreement's global temperature goals through nationally driven, progressively ambitious actions.

NDCs replaced the top-down model of the Kyoto Protocol with a universal, bottom-up framework applying to all countries. Each Party must update its NDC every five years, demonstrating increased ambition and transparency. Progress is assessed collectively through the Global Stocktake, which informs future NDCs and global action. The first NDCs were submitted in 2015, followed by an update cycle in 2020–2021 and the first Global Stocktake in 2023. By 2025, countries are expected to submit their next NDCs.

On the global level, the UNFCCC process and nationally determined contributions (NDCs) are seldom seen as a means to bridge the gap from global to national and regional policy by interviewees: Governments, according to interviewees, still regard NDCs as a primarily environmental policy subject rather than an economic and investment planning tool. One example being Germany, where the government formed in 2025 moved climate policy from foreign and economic ministries back to the environmental ministry, although this does not necessarily lead to less economic focus. At the same time, company interviewees argue that they need platforms for innovation, investment and action. In contrast, several interviewees from business coalitions reported that their work is focused on the top goal of emission reductions (in %) laid out in NDCs. That said, three strategies for businesses and business coalitions emerge on the global level: Firstly, some focus on the growing scheme of the Action Agenda around climate-COPs, which is being connected to NDCs. Secondly, others try to heavily influence NDC-development in member's home countries and regions. Thirdly, coalitions started to advocate on NDCs from countries that are not home to their multinational members but to important suppliers (e.g., those representing hard to tackle Scope 3 emissions).

Moving towards implementation of the Paris Agreement, our research indicates that business and business coalitions currently struggle, experiment and evolve to find the right levers to work on several geographical and administrative levels. The challenge is to apply resources most efficiently and effectively to handle the shift to more regional and sub-national levels. From what we heard, an innovative lever would be in-depth support for scalable solutions and supportive policies on local or national levels that can serve as a blueprint for policy development in other countries and regions.

### 4. Flexible and solution-oriented forms of (ad-hoc) collaboration create opportunities to solve sector-specific (and regional) challenges

On a sectoral level, sector- and technology-specific knowledge and understanding is needed to develop policy and advocacy guidance. In addition, as often pointed out by interviewees, alignment, joint messaging and action of companies within the same sector, especially from all parts of the value chain, is crucial to convince policy makers to adopt appropriate policies. Lastly, sector- and technology-specific policy means tackling a business' product specification, materials and design, which makes alignment among businesses even harder: Interviewees pointed to the hesitation by companies to change packaging for food or medicine products simply due to fear of having to go through the bureaucratic validation process. In one case, this was resolved by the coalition secretariat researching and clarifying the legal validation process. Here, traditional trade associations have a major advantage compared to coalitions in being sector-specific, trusted, knowledgeable and based on a very broad and representative membership – several interviewees pointed out that they are often seen as the voice of business in a particular sector, especially by politicians. They also typically self-identify as lobby organization more than some sustainability focused coalitions.

However, some initiatives are trying to tackle these challenges through more flexible and solution-oriented forms of collaboration without strict membership: They first bring together a critical share of companies from one sector, then leverage data analysis and information to develop several policy options and roadmaps. And, on this basis, they help both governments and businesses to negotiate and agree on solutions and enabling policies.

Looking at both shifts in geographical and sectoral focus, our research suggests that opening traditional, closed membership settings can create new opportunities for coordination of and collaboration in more specialized, data-driven and solution-oriented settings. As secretariat-driven approaches, these settings nevertheless need the leadership of either highly active companies or secretariat staff.

### 5. Creating more options for agreement can improve coalitions' role as intermediaries for diverse societal actors

Cooperation with other important political stakeholders, such as NGOs, unions, and trade associations, is highly contested among interviewees with approaches ranging from close and official cooperation, to (in-)direct influence and loose connections to actual distrust and confrontation. Interviewees mostly agree on NGOs playing an important role and recognise them as being important when forming and adjusting narratives and setting standards, e.g. on science-based targets or voluntary carbon markets. To some, NGOs also serve as a sounding board and as contacts to some political spectrums, while others claim that NGOs miss the understanding and in-depth knowledge of the private sector for closer cooperation.

On the contrary, trade associations and workers unions, through their broad membership and in-depth knowledge are not only key to implement sector-specific policies especially on national levels, but also to develop and transport economic arguments for climate action. Therefore, some interviewees see organized cooperation with trade associations and workers unions, e.g. through joint policy demands or narrative-building, as key for robust national climate policy, as seen in the German-European debate on a reduced industrial electricity price. Strikingly, many interviewees, especially from coalitions, seem to distrust trade associations and see them as opponents, report on them watering down ambitious policy demands or believe them to usually follow an approach that settles on the lowest common denominator. This has spurred action from business coalitions to guide their members on how to work with their own trade associations by positively influencing their positions, making use of their power through membership and bringing transparency to their advocacy work, e.g. through policy advocacy reports published by companies like Bayer or Unilever.

Business coalitions arguably have played the role of an intermediary, both directly between their members and governments as well as in bringing together a broad group of societal actors, like NGOs and trade associations. Keeping this position of a trusted intermediary remains one of their strengths, but our research indicates that this is limited by their nature of representing their business members. Therefore, new approaches may be needed to negotiate and develop joint advocacy with other societal actors and governments. Coalitions need openness to understand the interests of a variety of actors and to create more flexible options for agreement and common ground: A broad understanding of policy options and development paths can be created through modelling regulatory scenarios, financing models and their effects on markets.

### 6. Support in internal negotiations and scaling of innovation enhances coalitions' transformative role for members

Business coalitions are typically designed to serve their members' needs in several ways, such as capacity building, joint advocacy and pilot development, and are equally shaped by member's interests and actions. In practice, coalitions report to often work on three levels: with CSOs as their main focal points in member companies, with CEOs as supporters and spokespersons and with a third, more technical level for specific sustainability topics. There is a joint understanding among interviewees that, on the one hand, coalitions are well set-up to develop and spread guidelines and standards as well as build capacities for members' (internal) sustainability management, often in collaboration with NGOs and other stakeholders. On the other hand, sparking debate that would affect business strategy or policy schemes and therefore, in the long run, business models and product design, appears harder to collectively tackle: Interviewees question how coalitions are structured when it comes to advocacy and pilot projects with scaling potential. They point out that key roles involved in internal company negotiations are often left out, and that these internal processes receive little support. Some coalitions report having therefore started specific programmes for CFOs or CMOs.

Specific examples for the need to include further roles would be (1) the finance departments in companies that need to be convinced to pilot and scale technological solutions to achieve more sustainable practices, e.g. in so called hard-to-abate sectors, or (2) procurement and marketing teams in companies that need to balance price-sensitivity, brand reputation and global commodity markets with sustainability, such as food brands.

Shining light into the practical work of coalitions shows their value in capacity building and guidance. At the same time, our research underscores the opportunity for business coalitions to expand their services to members by supporting crucial internal negotiations and further facilitating scaling of innovation.

### 7. Business coalitions are challenged to balance shielding member interest and providing platforms for positive policy engagement

Public advocacy, through campaigns, open-letters and other means of communication has always been part of the advocacy work of business coalitions. According to interviewees, one of the key challenges here is and has always been building and spreading narratives that can be easily and broadly adopted by many and at the same time are ambitious enough to drive change. This challenge has even expanded over the past few years, due to more fragmented communication channels, the ESG backlash, and debates on transparency on advocacy.

While fragmented communication channels remain a task for media specialists, interviewees highly agree that business coalitions play a crucial role in managing the ESG backlash and "greenhushing" by publicly advocating for their members and thus shielding them from political discourses as well as to help them translate policy demands into adapted language for communication with policymakers. Recent examples are the switch to wording such as competitiveness, freedom to invest and energy abundance instead of focussing on emissions reduction, green investment or the energy transition. There is also broad agreement that proactive climate voices may (have to) move into much needed and appreciated private conversations, which poses an opportunity for coalitions to convene these meetings.

The idea of more transparent advocacy is however highly contested. On the one hand, it appears useful to clarify goals of advocacy internally and towards other organisations, such as trade associations and NGOs as well as to gain trust and credibility through transparency. On the other hand, interviewees argue that it may not help shielding companies from political attacks or may give rise to outdated naming-and-shaming techniques that hinder broad coalition building, especially with other societal actors.

The parallel developments of greenhushing, transparency and a shift toward less public conversations suggest that the role of business coalitions changes, too. The need to serve as a platform for external communication and public advocacy by members is partly being replaced by a role to be at the forefront of advocacy using new strategies to cover up and still bring their own and member's ideas into the political arena.

# Conclusion

Collective corporate action remains essential to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement, but it must continually adapt to shifting political and economic realities. This report set out to examine how business coalitions contribute to advancing ambitious climate policy amid growing geopolitical fragmentation and emerging ESG backlash, and to identify how negotiation strategies can strengthen their influence. Focusing on the multifaceted landscape of business coalitions, we provided a case study of the We Mean Business Coalition network, highlighting variations in coalition size, company participation, and LobbyMap rankings. Although the coalition network's structure is historically grown, its diversity in focus, design and scale offers distinct strengths to push for socio-economic tipping points of decarbonisation.

Through a combination of quantitative data analysis and in-depth interviews, we found that business coalitions have become indispensable actors in shaping the global climate agenda due to their collaborative, convening and convincing abilities: They can align corporate interests behind climate ambition – but their impact depends on how they manage internal diversity, regional differentiation, and external advocacy.

The research revealed that while many coalitions have succeeded in mobilising proactive members with strong climate agendas, their overall influence is limited by uneven participation across sectors and regions. Membership tends to cluster around a group of similar companies, leaving gaps in representation. This imbalance highlights the need for coalitions to clarify their positioning and role.

Internally, coalitions act as negotiating platforms that depend on consensus-building among members with varying interests. The ability to manage these multi-stakeholder dynamics – between proactive members, less engaged participants, and external partners such as NGOs and trade associations – is central to shaping effective advocacy. Externally, geopolitical fragmentation and ESG backlash requires coalitions to adapt their strategies: focusing more on regional and sectoral context, collaborating within new flexible alliances, and finding ways to steer members towards common goals.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the future role of business coalitions lies not only in collective advocacy but in helping members navigate political and organisational challenges. By supporting internal negotiations, facilitating joint advocacy and accelerating innovation, business coalitions can help turn corporate ambition into actionable, credible policy outcomes. Coalitions have a critical role to play in maintaining momentum as the global transition enters a more complex, contested, implementation-focused phase.

The landscape of business coalitions, alliances and networks, is historically grown, very broad and multifaceted. Our research therefore cannot cover every coalition and its mechanics. Through the lens of negotiation management, we have focussed on patterns around internal processes, stakeholder management and interests. However, our findings suggest that future research may want to understand coalitions from an organisational perspective or focus more on membership conditions. These perspectives would help to understand the structure of organisations, as briefly touched on in findings three and four of our study.

**WAY FORWARD**

Business coalitions play a pivotal role in advancing corporate climate ambition, yet they face structural and strategic challenges that may influence their efficiency and effectiveness. To enhance their impact and resilience, the following actions are suggested:

**1. Clearly define goals and roles.**

Coalitions can keep building legitimacy and trust with members and stakeholders alike by further clarifying their goals and roles as well as accompanying limitations, e.g. in neutral facilitation within political processes, due to their function as business-representatives.

**2. Strengthen negotiation management capacities.**
Coalitions can enhance professional facilitation and mediation skills among staff and members to manage internal differences and enhance external engagement, ensuring that diverse members can align around ambitious yet realistic goals.

**3. Adapt to a fragmented policy landscape.**
Coalitions can move towards approaches of differentiated, regionally grounded strategies – supported by partnerships with national and sectoral networks – to maintain coherence and impact across geographies.

**4. Reimagine advocacy-support under political headwinds.**
In an era of ESG backlash, coalitions could combine public advocacy with strategic convening and private diplomacy – protecting progressive voices and showcasing solutions while maintaining momentum for credible, collective climate leadership.

The next phase of the Business4Climate (B4C) project will focus on implementing these insights – applying negotiation management principles to support coalitions and their members to build stronger alliances, refine advocacy strategies, and achieve measurable policy impact. As climate negotiations enter a decisive decade, the collaboration between business, government, and civil society will determine whether ambition translates into action. Given our experience as a neutral facilitator and in training COP chairs and advising presidency teams, CEMUNE can contribute to this process, in particular when managing relations between diverse stakeholders. Our work aims to ensure that this collaboration is not only inclusive and evidence-based but also strategically negotiated – turning collective intent into effective, sustained transformation.

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# About

**CEMUNE** – the Centre for Multilateral Negotiations, a non-profit organisation, is dedicated to strengthening international negotiations for better outcomes on climate, biodiversity, and sustainability. Our goal is to achieve more effective outcomes at global UN sustainability summits by strengthening the negotiation capacities of all participants – fostering international cooperation for our planet. Over the past decade, we have contributed to the adoption of the Paris Agreement and supported over ten UN conferences with strategic process facilitation, providing tailor-made negotiation solutions for specific country and stakeholder needs. CEMUNE is the bridge between these international processes and those responsible for carrying out the work on the ground (Businesses, COP Presidencies, Governments, Civil Society) and serves as a neutral and trusted facilitator.

We stand for a sustainable and just future and support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through our commitment to multilateral negotiations, we promote climate action (SDG 13), the preservation of biodiversity, and the fight against desertification (SDGs 14 and 15). We strengthen peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) and advocate for global partnerships that enable the achievement of all goals set out in the 2030 Agenda (SDG 17).

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**THE B4C PROJECT**

This report is the first publication part of CEMUNE's Business4Climate (B4C) Project, which aims to strengthen business and government collaboration, and the impact of business coalitions. The gained insights support ambitious business coalitions and their members in advocating for climate action more effectively as well as inform public sector and civil society actors in how to join forces with progressive businesses to foster more ambitious policies. It further enables CEMUNE and its partners to orchestrate such processes and apply negotiation management expertise in the most efficient and effective way.

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