Twelve essentials of MEA negotiation

1. Representing your country in a multilateral negotiation is a serious undertaking and a major responsibility, not to be entered into lightly.

2. Prepare as much as possible to understand the subject of the negotiations, your country’s interests, and the interests of other countries. Learn about the forum and its rules of procedure, both formal and informal.

3. Support the process and participate constructively even in difficult situations. Unwarranted obstructionism can undermine the whole system.

4. Look for the win-win situations, and look for opportunities to support countries with different interests where possible. Their support may be needed in the future.

5. Treat other participants courteously and honestly. Good relationships and trust are invaluable assets, particularly when thinking about the long term. Humour and diplomacy can be very persuasive.

6. Focus on substantive objectives and be flexible on wording when your instructions allow. Focus on the interests of your country and other countries, rather than positions, to make progress.

7. In a session, when concerned and in doubt, request square brackets around the text in question, and allow discussion to move on. However, brackets should not be used lightly, as discussion of brackets can consume valuable negotiation time.

8. A workshop or informal group may help to resolve an impasse. More information and deeper understanding of the issues are sometimes the only way to move forward.

9. Responsible judgment is essential. Think twice before deciding to act or not to act.

10. Listen carefully to what is said and, just as importantly, to what is not said.

11. Prepare carefully for interventions, with a clear focus on objectives. Prioritize interests, and focus the number and length of interventions accordingly. Brevity and restraint are appreciated and are often very effective in winning support from others.

12. Be prepared for practical necessities, including alternative transportation, alternative meals, and local currency (small denominations!). Carrying simple food and a bottle of water is a good idea. Eat when possible – a negotiator’s life is unpredictable, and meals do not always happen when planned!

Source: Taken from the advance unedited third edition of the Multilateral Environmental Agreement Negotiator’s Handbook (UNEP, 2023). A further selection of content from the interactive online version of the handbook can be accessed on this toolkit here.