



UNFCCC COP26 and Glasgow Climate Pact: Sceptically Optimistic Outcome

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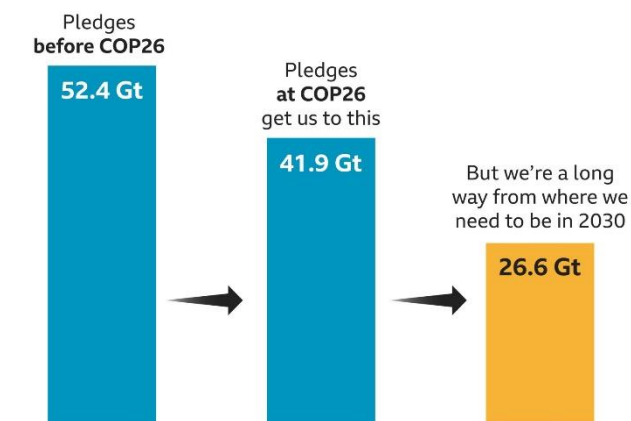
This year's biggest climate change pilgrimage, the UNFCCC COP26¹, concluded with several decisions, including the "Glasgow Climate Pact"², and other announcements on the sidelines. These came after two weeks of long discussions and heated negotiations amid youth-led mass protests outside the COP venue. COP26 ended by disappointing those anticipating bolder ambitions, but signalling a major leap in the eyes of others, in particular, the COP26 presidency. The emissions reduction pledges made by major emitters are

not sufficient and accordingly the resultant emissions are certain to exhaust the GHG budget (580 GtCO₂) critical for limiting a rise in global temperature to below 1.5°C within a decade, much earlier than the one suggested by the IPCC³. This single fact is sufficient to label COP26 a missed opportunity. However, just giving a label to an event does not mean we have reached a 'dead-end'. It is quite possible that countries will achieve the pledges made much earlier through aggressive actions. However, there is no guarantee that the pledges made at this year's COP will be seriously acted upon.

While remaining sceptical, we can still search for hidden optimism which could be capitalised on more in the days and years to come. COP26 was different from previous climate conferences, and it left its own mark. There were high expectations, similar to the atmosphere surrounding negotiations on the Paris Agreement six years ago. COP26 convened after a two-year gap due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, there were several factors that

Big emissions cuts still needed to limit warming to 1.5C

Projected greenhouse gas emissions in 2030, gigatonnes



Source: Energy Transitions Commission

BBC

contributed in lifting the visibility of COP26, including rising GHG emissions and climate-related disasters, COVID-19 impacts, political change in the US, the release of IPCC AR6 WG1 Report⁴ just before the event, participation of major leaders (with the exception of China and Russia) and key personalities, and the active engagement of the COP26 presidency with other parties, as well as increased attention from the mass media, growing public attention and youth protests. While COP26 was not a breakthrough when compared to COP21 which ended with the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the event did signal growing pressure on governments as well as main GHG emitting sectors to act fast and ambitiously. Governments' willingness to embrace 'net-zero' (e.g. the Net Zero World Initiative led by the US⁵) was partly a result of such pressure. COP26 indeed delivered a number of noteworthy outcomes⁶. On the periphery of COP26 official negotiations, a number of joint statements, agenda and declarations took place⁷, touching aspects such as halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030, a joint statement by the multilateral development banks, breakthrough agenda for transition to clean energy, the One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) project, global coal to clean energy transition, sustainable agriculture, innovation in agriculture, new mission innovation, zero emission vehicles, Glasgow-Sharm el Sheikh Work Programme on the Global Goal on Adaptation (The GlaSS), as well as the last minute surprise US-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s⁸. These are all encouraging.

The "Glasgow Climate Pact"² also succeeded in incorporating/acknowledging various documents such as the IPCC AR6 WG1 Report⁴ (as opposed to IPCC 1.5°C Special Report³ that was apparently sidelined at COP24), and requesting parties to revise Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to keep to the 1.5°C target and report to COP27 next year to be held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. There was also direct criticism on the failure to meet the USD100 billion finance pledge by 2020; however, the pact did include increased funding to developing countries (such as doubling finance for adaptation by 2025). In addition, phasedown (not 'phase-out' though!) of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies were explicitly mentioned for the first time. Negotiations also looked at new arrangements to discuss and address loss and damage issues, as well as finalising the Paris Agreement Rulebook, etc.

COP26 has ended but tasks remain ahead as reflected by COP26 President Alok Sharma "We can now say with credibility that we have kept 1.5 degrees alive. But, its pulse is weak and it will only survive if we keep our promises and translate commitments into rapid action."⁶ It is yet to be seen how major GHG emitters will act or how those with resources and capacity will help more vulnerable countries to adapt, minimise loss and damages, and survive the hardships. Unlike in the past, it will be harder to overlook or take a softer approach to meet the pledges made at COP26 in the future. Worsening climate impacts and extreme disasters, improved technology and innovation, drive towards transformative planning and circular economy, momentum towards investing in green infrastructure and nature-based solutions, rising public awareness and media attention, as well as the growing risk associated with investment in fossil fuels will all act as strong deterrents against insufficient action. It is therefore likely that the current pressure will continue to build over time and, in the worst

case, could exacerbate economic crises, geo-political risks and social unrest, if left untamed. The COVID-19 pandemic is a fresh reminder of how vulnerable we are to disturbances that could easily and rapidly escalate into global problems. Climate change impacts are going to be far more enduring than COVID-19 — it is just a matter of when and how. Time is ticking, and as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned, *"it is time to go into emergency mode — or our chance of reaching net-zero will itself be zero"*⁹.

This decade will be critical as we are on-track to exhaust all remaining GHG emissions budgets within this period. This simply means there is a risk that we are marching into unknown territory by letting the climate change tipping points be breached. This decade will be challenging too, as we only have a short time window to compensate for accumulated past inactions. So far, nobody has a clear-cut answer on how to deal with this problem as evidenced by the helplessness expressed in the NDC commitments by leading emitters. Hardly any countries are in a position to act more decisively and rapidly as they each have their own economic priorities and national interests to deal with. Therefore, solutions must be found not only at future COP meetings or climate conferences but in every aspect of our socio-economic and political construct. Instead of wasting time bargaining on vague commitments, future COPs should be the events that take stock of progress, promote successful approaches, and reset annual priorities where there are serious gaps.

It is therefore essential to organise future COP events with a sharp focus on the 2030 deadline so that this decade can be devoted to fight both the causes and impacts of climate change with serious deliberations. An obvious way is through NDCs, which are key instruments for operationalising the Paris Agreement, along with other instruments such as national climate policies, National Adaptation Plan (NAP), etc. Since countries are requested to further ramp-up their 2030 emissions reduction targets next year, it is important to change the mode of expression of NDCs by showing a clear roadmap to 2030. For that, NDCs could additionally incorporate annual milestones, year-by-year, until 2030 in critical areas such as mitigation, adaptation or preventing loss and damage, so that the pledges are strongly backed by realistic and traceable actions. For instance, it would be interesting to know how India is going to achieve four out of the five promises on clean energy transition and emission reductions in a scheme termed by Prime Minister Modi as 'panchamrita' (mixing five components for an ambrosia in Hindu tradition) by 2030¹⁰, and what technical and financial support it is expecting from developed economies to do so. This kind of clarity will open a new path for productive discussion in terms of effective channelling of financial, technical and capacity building support from various sources. Expressing an annual milestone not only reinforces the credibility of each government's resolve and seriousness towards addressing promises made for 2030 but it also sends a strong signal indicating a 'climate emergency' and acts as an 'early warning' of the impending threats. With such a strong signal, we can anticipate reactions from the market in favour of climate action, which in turn could further persuade governments to drop those policies that support GHG emissions practices. If countries are able to successfully lay out their ambitious commitments with a clear roadmap then, as claimed by some, COP26 will truly be remembered as a forum of real hope and action.

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- ¹ <https://ukcop26.org/>
- ² UNFCCC. 2021. Outcomes of the Glasgow Climate Change Conference - Advance Unedited Versions (AUVs), <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/glasgow-climate-change-conference-october-november-2021/outcomes-of-the-glasgow-climate-change-conference>
- ³ IPCC. 2018. Mitigation Pathways Compatible with 1.5°C in the Context of Sustainable Development. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty, <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/chapter-2/>
- ⁴ IPCC. 2021. Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, The Working Group I contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>
- ⁵ NREL. 2021. Net Zero World Initiative, <https://www.nrel.gov/international/net-zero-world.html>
- ⁶ UK Government. 2021. COP26: The Negotiations Explained. <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/COP26-Negotiations-Explained.pdf>
- ⁷ <https://ukcop26.org/the-conference/cop26-outcomes/>
- ⁸ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-china-joint-glasgow-declaration-on-enhancing-climate-action-in-the-2020s/>
- ⁹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/260645>
- ¹⁰ Prime Minister's Office. 2021. National Statement by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at COP26 Summit in Glasgow, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1768712>

(All web links were accessed during Nov 2021)

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