

## Policy Paper

# Words and deeds in Glasgow: COP26 as a milestone in global climate policy?

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## Introduction

In November 2021, Scotland's largest exhibition center in Glasgow is to host an international climate summit of great importance titled the United Nations Climate Change Conference, known as COP26. The 26<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties continues a series of high-level international climate summits, the first of which was held in 1995 in Berlin, Germany.<sup>1</sup> The COP26 has been delayed by one year – and its organization will be affected – by the Covid-19 pandemic. The event in Glasgow will be attended by 190 world leaders, government and city representatives, negotiators, businesses and activists,<sup>2</sup> with a goal to leverage the most ambitious climate goals updates through the *Nationally Determined Contributions* (NDC).<sup>3</sup>

COP26 delegates will follow up on the years of intense preparation in discussing and formulating a common strategy to tackle the serious global impacts of climate change on the Earth's environment. In addition to intense climate science research and background work by policy makers and experts, 13 high level conferences and summits have taken place since 2020 in preparation for COP26. The Glasgow summit will be divided into two zones – the Blue one for national delegations, UN agencies, media and non-profit organizations, and the Green zone of events and presentations for the public.<sup>4</sup>

The context in which COP26 is set to take place will test the world leaders' ability to effectively address the current environmental and health challenges. The Paris Agreement, resulting from the COP21 convention in 2015, was a landmark document, yet

it has not been universally accepted and adhered to in the years following. The NDC principle allows countries to determine their own ways how to reach the declared climate goals, with varying results. However, there is a clear trend of the largest world's economies turning green – or at least greener. This is not only due to continuing international diplomacy and increasingly respected voice of conclusive climate science. Local impacts of climate change have started to appear more frequently in regions around the world, serving as a wake-up call for many previously uninterested constituents.

## Climate change in one's backyard

The gradual increase of global temperatures caused by carbon emissions drives up the likelihood and frequency of extreme weather events. These can manifest themselves as heatwaves, heavy rains, flooding or drought<sup>5</sup> – affecting agricultural areas as well as towns and cities. It suffices to consider the events unfolded as lately as past summer of 2021. A large number of wildfires continued to destroy vast areas of California, keeping pace with the record-breaking wildfire summer of 2020.<sup>6</sup> Swaths of territory and many villages of Greece were virtually devastated by wildfires throughout the summer, with poor planning and lack of resources blamed for the extent of the damage.<sup>7</sup> Multiple wildfires also affected many parts of Russia, including dense taiga forests, burning a combined area corresponding to the size of the U.S. state of Florida.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, Canada and the Northwest of the U.S. experienced record breaking heatwaves, with temperatures rising

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, 2021. Conference of the Parties. Available at: <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>

<sup>2</sup> UK Presidency of COP26. 2021. COP26 Explained, p. 9. Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Determined Contributions is a principle agreed at COP21 in Paris, according to which each country is responsible for determining ways to fulfill their carbon emissions reduction.

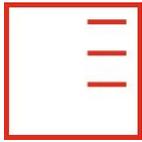
<sup>4</sup> UK Presidency of COP26. 2021. COP26 Explained, p. 43. Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. Undated. Climate Change Indicators. U.S. EPA. Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/weather-climate>

<sup>6</sup> Canon, G. 2021. Lightning threatens California as fires continue to burn across the state. The Guardian, September 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/sep/09/california-fire-weather-caldor-dixie-latest>

<sup>7</sup> Clapp, A. 2021. The Fires in Greece Are a Terrifying Warning. New York Times, August 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/opinion/greece-fires-climate-change.html>

<sup>8</sup> Eckel, M. 2021. Russia Is Burning. Here's What You Need To Know. Radio Free Europe, August 2021. Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-wildfires-climate-change/31429880.html>



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up to 50 °C, paralyzing cities such as Portland, Seattle and Vancouver.<sup>9</sup> In mainland Europe, heavy rains and violent storms occurred in numerous regions throughout the summer, causing local floods in many countries. Parts of Germany were flooded by rivers and streams that turned into torrential currents, washing away entire neighborhoods and villages, causing multiple casualties and property damage.<sup>10</sup>

## The imploring voice of science

The science on climate change and the human footprint as its causal force has been clear a long time. The recent extreme weather events have led to a new momentum of public recognition, in line with the long-standing political and policy effort to tackle climate change on the global scale. One of the key science-informed documents which has made headlines recently is the 6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report published in August by the *Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change (IPCC)*. Titled *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, the report produced in collaboration with hundreds of scientists across the world states that the human influence in warming the Earth's atmosphere is "unequivocal".<sup>11</sup> Extreme weather impacts such as ones described above, melting of ice caps and the related sea level rise affecting coastal areas and cities is a reality in scores of regions and communities. The adverse impacts are due to become more severe and frequent<sup>12</sup>, with significant impacts on natural environment, society and economy across the world.

The IPCC report's significance is less in the novelty of its findings, and more in the certainty and urgency. This urgency is due to be echoed in the discussion panels and negotiation rooms at COP26. As political

leaders and activists come together this November in Glasgow, they will be forced to look for solutions widely acceptable and incredibly difficult to implement, at the same time. In addition to climate science, national interests and the questions of development and justice will be playing a key role in the negotiations. After a forced break caused by the pandemic, and building on the tireless work of research and collaboration of climate scientists and policy makers, COP26 presents a unique opportunity. That is, in case the negotiating parties will truly take up their share of responsibility and show willingness to make a set of difficult, yet necessary decisions to tackle the climate crisis.

## Major players at COP26

Among the goals officially set to be achieved at COP26 in Glasgow, the first one is to get countries to significantly reduce their carbon emissions by 2030 to ensure net zero emissions by mid-century<sup>13</sup>. This will be more easily achievable for some countries than others, depending on their current energy matrix and industrial structure. The second goal is to ensure adaptation and protection of vulnerable communities and habitats. Some areas and regions are extremely vulnerable to – and require assistance to deal with – sea level rise, loss of biodiversity and extreme weather. Thirdly, the COP26 is due to remind wealthy countries of their earlier promises to mobilize substantial climate finance through international institutions, private and public sector – in order to help the rest of the world achieve the ambitious climate goals. Finally, the summit should serve as a major platform of collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society. Finalizing the rules to make the earlier

<sup>9</sup> Schiermeier, Q. 2021. Climate change made North America's deadly heatwave 150 times more likely. *Nature*, July 2021. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01869-0>

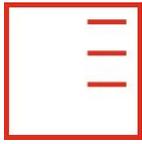
<sup>10</sup> Deutsche Welle. 2021. Floods in Germany. DW, September 2021. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/floods-in-germany/t-58300604>

<sup>11</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2021. *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*. Sixth Assessment Report. Summary for Policy Makers. IPCC, August 2021, p. 5.

Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>

<sup>12</sup> Carrington, D. 2021. Climate crisis 'unequivocally' caused by human activities, says IPCC report. *The Guardian*. August 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/aug/09/climate-crisis-unequivocally-caused-by-human-activities-says-ipcc-report>

<sup>13</sup> Net zero refers to the state of producing less carbon emissions that the amount that can be taken out of the atmosphere.



Paris Agreement truly operational is one of the goals in this respect.<sup>14</sup>

Adhering to the Paris Agreement itself has not been as smooth as previously hoped. As for the **United States**, the country withdrew from the Paris Agreement under Donald Trump, only to re-join it again just hours after Joe Biden was sworn in as President in January 2021.<sup>15</sup> Biden's administration has introduced a highly ambitious climate policy, introducing a clean electricity standard that would in effect bring the electricity sector in the U.S. to net zero by 2035. Biden's USD 2 trillion Clean Energy Plan sets bold pathways to reduce carbon emissions. Investing in offshore wind energy production, reconsidering fuel-efficiency standards for cars, or freezing new oil and gas leases on public lands<sup>16</sup> indicate the climate policy U-turn of the current Administration.

Across the Atlantic, similarly ambitious in goals and priorities ahead of the COP26 negotiations are evident in the **United Kingdom**. Hosting the summit this year, the UK Government makes clear that climate change mitigation and adaptation is a priority – and has been for some time. Britain has aimed to lead the green transformation in Europe – for the sake of the environment, as well as its economy and industry.<sup>17</sup> Britain has reduced its dependency on coal in the last decade – nowadays only 2% of UK electricity comes from coal, down from 40% in 2012. The country plans to phase out coal entirely by 2024, ban the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030 and reduce overall carbon emissions by 78% by 2035<sup>18</sup>. In the meantime, the City of London is imposing daily charges for driving diesel cars, in an effort to encourage the passengers

and companies to switch to cleaner forms of transport.<sup>19</sup>

The **European Union**, for its part, is also one of the global leaders in climate mitigation and adaptation policy. Its European Green Deal serves as an ambitious framework of processes and regulations to bring down carbon emissions across all member states. Emission levels are to be cut by 55% by 2030 (compared to 1990), bringing the EU to climate neutrality by 2050. Massive investments in research and innovation are part of the Green Deal, in addition to pushing respective national targets for transport, buildings and infrastructure, and continuing to strengthen the EU Emissions Trading System focused on sectors of power, industry and aviation (while also extending it to maritime transport). On the international level, the European Commission has been involved in high level negotiations to persuade major emitters to step up their carbon reduction goals in the run-up to the COP26.<sup>20</sup>

A mixed model of bold green investment and dependence on coal is characteristic for the most significant Asian player – People's Republic of **China**. The country's vast energy consumption is growing each year, currently addressed by a mix of carbon-emitting coal plants and a growing proportion of renewable energy sources. On one hand, China has become the biggest global investor in green energy infrastructure and production, particularly for hydroelectric, solar and wind power. The country is home to the majority of solar module manufacturing companies and also leads the global market of the largest wind turbines. On the other hand, China also built 85 coal-powered energy plants in 2020 and continued to increase its highly emitting cement production for the global market throughout

<sup>14</sup> UK Presidency of COP26. 2021. COP 2026 Goals. What do we need to achieve at COP26? Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/>

<sup>15</sup> Milman, O. 2021. Biden returns US to Paris climate accord hours after becoming president. The Guardian, January 2021, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/20/paris-climate-accord-joe-biden-returns-us>

<sup>16</sup> Klacansky, K. 2021. China vs. US: The Green Energy Race. EUROPEUM Policy Paper. August 2021, pp. 3-4. Available at: <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/4310/policy-paper-china-vs-us-the-green-energy-race>

<sup>17</sup> The latter is of special significance after Britain officially exited the European Union and its Economic Area.

<sup>18</sup> Sharma, A. 2021. COP 26 Explained – Foreword by President Designate, pp. 6-7. Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> IQAir. 2021. London to impose new daily charges on polluting vehicles to fight air pollution. July 2021. Available at: <https://www.iqair.com/us/blog/air-quality/london-to-impose-new-daily-charges-on-polluting-vehicles-to-fight-air-pollution>

<sup>20</sup> European Commission. 2021. EU climate action and the European Green Deal. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/eu-climate-action\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/policies/eu-climate-action_en)



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the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup> These developments call China's declared commitment to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 into question.

## Voice and impact: rest of the world

The above suggests the contours of likely approaches and priorities, which will inform the dominant players' negotiation positions in Glasgow. State of current industry and energy needs will necessarily counterbalance the goodwill and purely ecological perspective of climate action. It is important to remember, however, that judging all participating countries and economies by one single standard would be the opposite of transparent and fair. This is especially true with regards to regions of Asia, Pacific, Latin America and Africa, sometimes inaccurately referred to as "developing" countries.

Many countries have been on the losing end of global trade liberalization and industrialization impacts in the past decades. As a result, many of their territories and communities have suffered significant environmental damage, bearing the adverse externalities of global resources exploitation, production and industry. For these countries and regions, much is at stake, as they are already facing severe impacts of deforestation, soil erosion, temperature-rise-induced migration, pollution, extreme weather, or coastal flooding connected to sea level rise. Many Pacific islands' very survival is at risk due to the latter.

Wealthy countries have made considerable efforts to ensure that these voices will be heard and addressed at COP26. While the preparatory work and consultations have been largely inclusive, some structural difficulties remain. For instance, many overseas delegates to the COP26 are already

expressing concern over the financial burden of required isolation which is part of travel restrictions currently in place in the UK. Access to the Covid-19 vaccines in much of the world is still limited, which leads many delegates to make difficult choices in the runup to the summit that is key for their countries' future.<sup>22</sup> While the UK COP26 Presidency declares that it is prepared to cover the cost of necessary quarantine accommodations and vaccines for delegates,<sup>23</sup> some skepticism remains over the feasibility of those promises as the summit quickly approaches.

## Cities racing ahead

The role of cities and municipalities in climate change adaptation has been growing, in some instances overshadowing the efforts of respective national governments. Cities have acted as change-makers, often committing to impose stricter carbon reduction policies than those prescribed by national legislation. This is especially true of the most climate progressive mayors in the United States, Canada, Britain or France, to name a few. Under the *C40 Cities* initiative, however, a much wider spectrum of 97 cities representing over 700 million residents have committed to follow and implement the Paris Agreement,<sup>24</sup> addressing climate change in urban areas on a daily basis.

The international climate advocacy has built on the significance and role of cities in climate adaptation worldwide. The above-mentioned IPCC initiative has dedicated one of its three working groups to adaptation and vulnerabilities, highlighting the role of cities and urban areas as places of impacts, as well as potential drivers of change.<sup>25</sup> The COP26 Presidency has launched the *Cities Race to Resilience* initiative to support cities throughout the Glasgow negotiations, and to build a platform for their long-term collaboration in implementing the

<sup>21</sup> Klacansky, K. 2021. China vs. US: The Green Energy Race. EUROPEUM Policy Paper. August 2021, pp. 7-8. Available at: <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles/detail/4310/policy-paper-china-vs-us-the-green-energy-race>

<sup>22</sup> Brooks, L. 2021. Scottish campaigners condemn Cop26 as 'the most exclusionary ever'. The Guardian, September 2021. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/09/scottish->

[campaigners-condemn-cop26-as-the-most-exclusionary-ever-accommodation](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/sep/09/scottish-campaigners-condemn-cop26-as-the-most-exclusionary-ever-accommodation)

<sup>23</sup> UK Presidency of COP26. 2021. COP26 Conference Delegates. Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/the-conference/delegates/>

<sup>24</sup> C40 Cities. Undated. About C40 Cities. Available at: <https://www.c40.org/about>

<sup>25</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Undated. Working Group II Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/working-group/wg2/>



climate adaptation goals.<sup>26</sup> It seems evident that mayors and policy makers from ambitious cities are due to represent a strong voice in Glasgow.

## Words and deeds

The global pandemic has shown the importance of international collaboration and commitment on one hand, and the irreplaceable value to scientific research translated into policy, on the other. The same principles apply to the global efforts to tackle the climate crisis. The priority to limit the global temperature rise to 1.5 °C and ensure net zero emissions by mid-century is clear. The question is whether national governments and agencies will come with measures and NDCs ambitious enough to meet this goal before it is too late. While technology necessary for addressing the climate crisis is within their reach, the extent of the necessary investment is staggering, especially for many countries currently bearing the most severe impacts of climate change. It blurs together questions of high-level and municipal politics, environmental justice, energy needs and development – from the global level to cities, towns and villages.

This is why the background work and the summit negotiations are bound to be so complex and difficult. However, the Glasgow conference is a huge opportunity to reveal the true extent of determination and willingness of national delegations, and their ability to translate the message convincingly to their constituents. The reality of climate change does not recognize national borders and jurisdictions. From global trade infrastructure to transport, energy, industry and individual households, every decision leads to important impacts and therefore matters. To quote the President designate of COP Alok Sharma, “COP26 needs to be decisive. Whether future generations look back at this time with admiration or despair, depends entirely on our ability to seize this moment”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Cities Race to Resilience. Undated. About. CRR website. Available at: <https://citiesracetoresilience.org/about/>

<sup>27</sup> Sharma, A. 2021. COP 26 Explained – Foreword by President Designate, p. 7. Available at: <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>



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