

COP26 – Two Steps Forward, One Step Back, while avoiding oil and gas

When an international process influences humanity's long-term survival on Earth, it is difficult to describe success or failure, because anything other than urgent action seems unfathomable. Progress is too slow when, as a species, we are struggling to live sustainably, healthily, and justly on Earth, and our United Nations (UN) remains only as strong as the more powerful countries permit.

Yet our ability to even use terms like 'success' or 'failure' with respect to global efforts on rising temperatures, reflects an achievement of creating a global process - the Paris Agreement. This process is where all countries must report their greenhouse gas emissions and plans to reduce, where developed countries must lead in emissions reduction and climate finance, where the drive for finance to poorer countries is organized, where the UN coordinates meetings and calculates progress (or lack of), and where an intergovernmental body collates the latest climate science to summarize consequences of insufficient inaction to life on earth – all informing and empowering citizens to evaluate their own, and the effectiveness of their governments', response.

After eight UN climate Conference of Parties (COP), I could define success/failure as 'one step forward two steps back (failure)' or 'two steps forward and one step back (success)'. The COP26 in Glasgow, set during a global pandemic, was 'two steps forward one step back'.

Yet this was also, in brazen ways, 'developed country'/high extraction dependent economy COP, not only in location but also in priorities. It avoided galvanizing developed country leadership to rapidly reduce their oil and gas production, transform unsustainable economic systems, consumption levels and industrial agriculture, and take accountability for their fair share in delivering promised finance to poorer countries - including responsibility to sufficiently help those currently most affected, but least responsible, for climate change (loss and damage). These concerns help define the next steps of our advocacy work.

The two steps forward:

There were significant 'two steps forward' which, for those working closely on the long-term effectiveness of the Paris Agreement, are important to uphold. These are steps forward that, despite the pandemic, were bolstered by advantages – a weak previous COP few wanted to repeat, another alarming climate science report¹, a continued, extraordinary rise in civil society activism, a committed return of the largest developed country (USA) emitter, and an unexpected US-China announcement half-way through.

After three unsuccessful COP attempts, this near **completion of the Paris Agreement Implementation Rulebook** was critical for continued trust in the Paris Agreement (PA). Decisions in most implementation guidelines also managed to avoid the 'lowest common

¹ IPCC 6th Assessment Report The Physical Science, August 2021, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-i/>

denominator’. **Carbon Markets Mechanisms in Article 6** of the Paris Agreement are controversial because they entail ‘offsetting’ emissions, as opposed to reducing the emission source (i.e.: fossil fuel extraction and burning). Nor do carbon markets, brought in last minute to the Paris Agreement (PA) in 2015, address climate and environmental justice concerns. Yet the Article 6 implementation guidelines had to be finished, and the result was a more robust accounting framework than was possible (and rejected) at COP25. The guidelines addressed accounting for ‘inside and outside’ the NDCs, where all units must have authorization by the host country, and REDD+² can only be done under normal guidance. Guidelines also included some significant human rights and Indigenous People’s rights language, and an ‘independent redress process’, critical to help avoid abuses experienced in earlier carbon offset models. However, there was deep disappointment in the African Group, which sought better accountability in linking a percentage of carbon market proceeds for adaptation in both Article 6 market approaches. And concerns over double counting potential, while improved from COP25 politics, remain.

Transparency guidelines are to be the same for developed and developing countries, important for effective compliance, though there was controversy over different metrics being allowed in some incidences, as well allowance for some confidential ‘provisions’.

Common time frames for reporting, a negotiator migraine for a number of years and critical in influencing mitigation ambition of the PA, kept to the more effective 5-year time period, with a ‘counting backward’ approach that addressed some country concerns - for example, 2035 NDCs must be communicated 2025, with the potential to be revised.

Another ‘two steps forward’, after years of civil society advocacy (including QUNO), was the inclusion of **human rights language** not only in Article 6, but also in the overall COP decision. This language is important in guiding government climate policy to involve meaningful public participation, and to better protect communities negatively affected by climate action. The level of human rights language was, ironically, helped by one country’s insistence in the first week to remove human rights language for a COP decision on Action for Climate Empowerment³. The resulting civil society outcry, and shock in progressive countries, strengthened support in the second week for human rights inclusion in remaining decisions.

The **COP final decision**, known as the [Glasgow Climate Pact](#), went through several drafts and a final language drama, to better integrate PA language of fairness. The ‘steps forward’ include the first mention of ‘fossil fuels’ in a decision text, requested action on fossil fuel subsidies (language weakened to ‘inefficient’ subsidies, but significant none-the-less), and a strong grounding in climate science including holding to a 1.5C global temperature rise limit. The UK Presidency, backed by its constructive delegation at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), reflected IPCC findings of the significant difference to people and nature between a 1.5C target over the pre-Paris 2C target. This recognition of 1.5C is an achievement,

² REDD+ through the UNFCCC - <https://redd.unfccc.int/>

³ Known as ACE - <https://unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/the-big-picture/what-is-action-for-climate-empowerment>

as a number of ‘low ambition’ countries have sought to undermine the 1.5C scientific findings, which would include the need to rapidly reduce fossil fuel production for a safe and healthy mitigation approach.

The mixed steps – forward and back:

More than 150 countries have now submitted a **new or updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC)**, and at this COP we can include the latecomers India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Yet the combined NDCs, which countries must submit under the Paris Agreement, remain far from levels needed to avoid catastrophic climate change. According to UNFCCC calculations, NDCs would enable *an increase* in global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of 16% by 2030, not a 45% reduction of 2010 levels by 2030 and net-zero by 2050 to keep warming at 1.5C above pre-industrial levels.⁴ Nor are NDCs all-encompassing - they do not include military emissions, and count fossil fuel burning (user) rather than extraction (seller), thus hiding producer responsibility.

Throughout this COP, the UK Presidency choreographed ‘**declaration**’ **announcements** separate to the COP agenda. The declarations were not ‘agreements’ with clear accountability mechanisms, so their effectiveness will depend on the leadership of signatories. And while welcome, including the call to phase down coal, the declarations disturbingly avoided mitigation efforts through the reduction of oil and gas production. Coal is currently the fuel of poorer countries; the absence of similar calls to ‘phase down’ oil and gas production enables the UK, most developed country, and wealthy developing country fossil fuel extractive economies to continue lucrative extraction. This avoidance counters IPCC guidance on rapid reduction of all fossil fuels in safer efforts to stabilize global temperature rise at 1.5C⁵.

The declarations included:

- Reducing tropical deforestation.
- ‘Phase down of coal’ – a *UK Presidency COP declaration subsequently strengthened by the US/China declaration. There was also an agreement to financially support South Africa’s transition from coal, a potential model of developed country support if based on grant rather than loans which increase developing country debt.*
- Shifting to ‘net zero’ and focus on electric transport/cars (easier in wealthy countries).
- Methane reduction of 30% by 2030 through more efficiency in fossil fuel production (but not apparently, a reduction of fossil fuel extraction itself), with funding of over \$300 million by philanthropists.
- ‘Nature based solutions’ – helpful if focused on regenerating degraded ecosystems, but of concern when used as a mitigation strategy to substitute reductions in fossil fuel use.

⁴ <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/nationally-determined-contributions-ndcs/nationally-determined-contributions-ndcs/ndc-synthesis-report#eq-5>

⁵ 2018 IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C, p.14
https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_SPM_version_report_LR.pdf

- Promoting widespread use of carbon capture storage (CCS) to enable continued oil and gas use, rather than phasing out. CCS remains unproven to scale, energy intensive and enables methane release. The absence of a declaration on renewable energy promotion ignores IPCC conclusions that “the political, economic, social and technical feasibility of solar energy, wind energy and electricity storage technologies has improved dramatically over the past few years, while that of nuclear energy and carbon dioxide capture and storage (CCS) in the electricity sector have not shown similar improvements”⁶.
- The First Movers Coalition, which focuses on developing ‘emerging clean technologies accessible and scalable’ to enable the continued or increased use of today’s carbon intensive industries (steel, trucking, shipping, cement and aviation), through hoped for development in less carbon-intensive technologies⁷. Again, these technologies must be examined for their potential to either help with genuine transformation, or to enable continued, rather than phase out, of fossil fuels. In addition, the assumptions on increased use of unsustainable activities (for example, aviation), the ‘have our cake and eat it too’ which may be soothing for some to hear but waste precious time to making the needed transformations to stabilize environmental destruction.

The Glasgow Climate Pact did bring **positives** in strengthening ocean-based action and to accelerate NDC mitigation action before 2030. The [US/China Declaration](#), announced in the second week, helped pave decisive language for the COP decisions. Yet language is everything in these decisions - the Glasgow Climate Pact called to *‘accelerate the development, deployment and dissemination of technologies, and the adoption of policies, to transition towards low-emission energy systems, including by rapidly scaling up the deployment of clean power generation and energy efficiency measures’*. The wording did not mention ‘renewable’ energy; the use of the term ‘clean energy’ includes nuclear power (a descriptive term which avoids the ‘unclean’ complication of nuclear power dependence on non-renewable natural resources, and resulting in greater access to nuclear materials (conflict) and long term radioactive waste).

The several ‘one step’ back:

On **Climate finance**, the 2009 promise by developed countries to offer \$100 billion per year by 2020 to developing countries was not met in 2020, nor in 2021, despite billions found in developed country budgets for covid support. Entering this COP, there remained insufficient accountability for fair share finance delivery. In turn, existing finance significantly relies on loans rather than grants. Faced with this continued failure, the COP decisions did include some positive steps forward. Specifically, a climate finance delivery plan to reach 100 billion by 2023 and 120 billion by 2025, and an assessment in 2027 (2025 data) of progress. The adaptation fund received promises to be doubled, but this comes from a relatively low baseline.

⁶ The IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C, Chapter 4 p. 315, https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_Chapter4_High_Res.pdf

⁷ <https://www.weforum.org/first-movers-coalition>

Loss and Damage was never a main priority for the UK Presidency, nor of developed countries in general. Loss and damage - where those most responsible for current climate change help those most affected and least responsible - is the story of developed countries studiously avoiding the 'C' word – compensation. Officially recognized at a COP in 2013, Loss and Damage is described as the orphan in the triplets of mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage. The COP decisions promised a 'dialogue' in 2022 for loss and damage. This lack of meaningful action was a profound disappointment despite extraordinary advocacy efforts for sufficient finance, including increasing united multi-faith advocacy. The hope - if these voices continue to gain strength, we may yet have an example for future generations of acting responsibly 'when we knew', to protect those most vulnerable.

Finally, the UK Presidency called this the 'most inclusive COP ever', but a record number of COP badges did not result in record inclusivity; **observer access was severely limited to the negotiation rooms**, and a digital observation platform continually crashed out any alternate transparency. The frustration, both in access and progress, resulted in a walk-out of many observers on the last Friday, chanting for climate justice, and "*the people, united, will never be defeated.*"

The next steps beyond COP26:

Implementing an in-person COP26, amidst massive logistical and equity issues, was possible through the intense efforts of people, including the UK Presidency, climate negotiators worldwide, UNFCCC staff, civil society advocacy, workers who built the venue and those who stood in the rain, day in and day out, to check badges. Their efforts deserve praise. As do achievements to finalize a more effective and fair text, including language of 1.5C and human rights and Indigenous People's Rights, than were possible at the COP25.

Yet the **COP26 is a warning** of the challenges we continue to face. The science of climate change, its drivers and the destructive consequences of insufficient action, are no longer debatable. Instead, we face a struggle over the narrative of how to 'address' climate change. This 'developed country' COP seemed to continue without recognition of the hypocrisy. For example, while the COP Presidency focused on reducing the use of coal in poorer coal-dependent countries like India, US President Biden was seeking increases in oil production to reduce rising US gas prices. Norway, the most fossil fuel dependent economy in Europe, sought success in carbon off-set guidelines but announced no reduction in its oil extraction. Outside the COP venue, Norwegian grandparents protested government inaction while at home Norwegian youth take their government to court.

Three years ago, in its *Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C*, IPCC authors offered four mitigation scenarios to stabilize global temperature rise at a safer level. Scenarios ranged from rapid reduction of fossil fuels (without reliance on bioenergy and carbon capture storage), to a delayed reduction of fossil fuel use resulting in temperature 'overshoot' that involved

significant increases in species and ecosystem extinction⁸. Holding to a 1.5C limit was concluded as still possible and requiring changes at ‘unprecedented scale’. These included deep emissions cuts in all sectors, a range of technologies, behavioral changes, and an increased investment in low carbon options⁹. What was missing, concluded the IPCC co-chair Professor Jim Skea, was political will.

The COP26 priorities, while important on technologies and investment in low carbon options, were selective in narrative, and of serious concern over the political will to transform major drivers familiar to wealthier countries - oil and gas extraction, industrial agriculture, and unsustainable consumption levels (including diets). The COP26 priorities ringfenced many drivers dominated by money and power interests, in turn influencing climate action that can dangerously prioritize focus on ‘symptoms’ over ‘diseases’ (root causes). Strikingly, the initiative by Costa Rica and Denmark, ‘**Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance**’¹⁰, gained additional supporters of France, Greenland, Ireland, Sweden, Wales, and Quebec but was not joined by the UK nor even the Scottish government, which had made a small but historic contribution to loss and damage during the COP.

As with efforts to abolish slavery in the 19th Century - where decision makers benefited financially from an economy dependent on inhumane activities - many major climate change drivers are lucrative activities disproportionally influencing decision making power. A transformation away from fossil fuel extraction also challenges money and power relationships evolving over the last 150 years, both in centralized energy ownership and geo-political power closely tied to natural resource control.

In 2022, the IPCC will complete its release of the **6th Assessment Report**, and people are listening. This COP was witness to a phenomenal rise in global climate awareness over the last years. People’s engagement can profoundly influence the rate of transformational change, in more healthy and fair government policy and regulation, in private enterprise, meaningful nature regeneration and protection, and in community efforts to achieve the systemic changes needed to avoid catastrophic global heating and environmental destruction. We face an extraordinary period in human history – time is limited, yet we have the knowledge of what is happening and why, and the potential to transform and help build a more sustainable and just world, and to protect nature on which the lives of our children and future generations depend.

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⁸ 2018, IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C, p.16

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2018/07/SR15_SPM_version_stand_alone_LR.pdf

⁹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/climate-change-ipcc-report-un-global-warming-1-5c-coral-reefs-arctic-ice-islands-incheon-korea-a8572926.html>

¹⁰ <https://beyondoilandgasalliance.com/>

