

Into waters uncharted

Was COP26 in Glasgow a success?

The world has done too little to tackle climate change. In Glasgow parties agreed on three ways to start doing more



Nov 14th 2021

Glasgow

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LATE IN THE afternoon of Saturday November 13th, when the COP26 climate talks were nearly 24 hours into overtime, the European Commission's vice president, Frans Timmermans, took the floor. He worried that the sleep-deprived representatives of the 197 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) were about to stumble "in the last couple of hundred metres before the finish line" and pleaded with his fellow-delegates "to just think about one person in your life...that will still be around in 2030, and think about how that person will live if we do not stick to the 1.5°C here today."

His plea seemed to unblock the long drawn-out proceedings in which no one was getting all that they wanted, and some seemed they might not be getting enough to make it worth the candle. In the slew of speeches which followed, the vast majority accepted some level of compromise on their misgivings and announced their support for what has now become the Glasgow climate pact.

The delegates representing the 197 parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) came to Glasgow with one task above all others: to oil the cogs of the [Paris agreement](#), or possibly even re-engineer them, thoroughly enough for the possibility of keeping the world's temperature within 1.5°C of what it was in the mid-19th century to remain just about in reach. Though the agreement's primary target, as set in 2015, is keeping global warming "well below 2°C", it also says that countries should "pursue efforts" towards doing better and keeping warming down to 1.5°C.

This 1.5°C limit has since then taken on a totemic importance. This is in part because of a report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2018 which stressed how damaging climate change beyond that level would be. It is also because some island nations believe that they will not survive the sea-level rise that would result should temperatures get any higher.

Achieving the 1.5°C limit was always understood to require cuts in emissions far larger than those set forth in the promised emissions reductions—"nationally determined contributions", or NDCs—tabled by the nations assembled in Paris in 2015. To make up for the deficiency, at least in principle, the agreement laid out a timetable according to which those NDCs would be ratcheted up every five years. The covid-19 pandemic threw a spanner into this timing, and so the revised NDCs finally turned up this year, as part of the process which led up to Glasgow.

This new round of NDCs was not enough to make the 1.5°C target reachable. Modelling carried out by number-crunchers within the Glasgow halls showed that, if they were delivered, there would be a 68% chance of temperatures rising to 1.9°C-3.0°C, with a median value of 2.4°C.

If various pledges to go to "net-zero" emissions—meaning countries emit no more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than they remove from it—sometime around or shortly after the middle of the century are added to the calculations things look better, with the range coming down to between 1.5°C and 2.6°C. Yet for now, talk of net-zero is mostly just talk. China has said it would ensure its emissions hit a peak before 2030 and reach net-zero by

2060 in spite of the fact that it still generates more than 60% of its electricity from coal. Many other countries' net-zero plans are alarmingly light on detail. And even model scenarios that make the most generous assumptions about how national emissions-reduction plans are implemented find that by the early 2030s the world will have already emitted enough greenhouse gases to mean a 50% chance of exceeding the 1.5°C goal.

To “keep 1.5°C alive”, as Britain, the host of the conference, said it had to do, thus required a dramatic further acceleration of the process defined in Paris. Glasgow delivered three ways that may speed things up: by changing timetables, by tweaking financing arrangements and by allowing for greater multilateralism. Whether they work, let alone do so at the pace that is required, is still to be seen.

The first came in the form of an accelerated turn of the NDC ratchet. The text approved in the conference's final plenary, which now makes up the Glasgow pact, “requests” that parties to the Paris agreement increase their pledges by 2022 instead of in the middle of the decade.

Several large emerging economies, most notably India, objected on the grounds that they were already doing all they could. The majority, however, were of the view that deleting this clause would bury chances of keeping the 1.5°C goal alive, and the hold-outs acceded. The text does not, however, make annual NDCs the new normal; it envisages new NDCs specifically on 2030 goals next year, and then NDCs on 2035 goals in 2025. Without that clause, said Niklas Höhne of Climate Action Tracker, the 1.5°C target would have been dead.

The second attempt to accelerate progress towards the Paris goals focused on financing and the facilitation of new cash flows—though not anything like as much as poor countries would have wished, and none of it upfront.

In 2009 rich countries promised to mobilise \$100bn of climate finance each year for poor countries by 2020. By 2019 the annual flow had only reached \$80bn, according to the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries. In 2020 the pandemic intervened: there is no agreed up-to-date tally, but it is hard to find people who honestly believe the timetable was met. This shortfall was a huge sore point going into Glasgow, repeatedly cited by the leaders of poor countries and their negotiators.

There was also a perceptible change in their rhetoric. In the COPs of the 2010s, poor countries framed the \$100bn figure partly as a show of solidarity from the rich countries and partly as a charitable grant. The West, the quite reasonable argument went, had grown wealthy by burning fossil fuels which are harming the planet. That handed it a peculiar responsibility, and gave poor countries that had not been responsible for the original damage a moral claim to assistance.

In Glasgow another justification came to the fore, one which frames the cash as an essential tool for energy transition, rather than as a form of aid. Without it, poor countries argued that they did not have the means to decarbonise. The magnitude of money sought changed, too. India said it needed \$1trn over the next decade if it were to cut carbon and boost resilience more than it was already doing. African countries demanded \$700bn each year. The V20, a group founded by 20 vulnerable countries in 2015 and which now has a membership of 48, appealed for rich countries to meet the annual \$100bn goal and fill the gap left from previous years. And other emerging markets called for a higher annual target to be in place after 2025.

Poor countries do not just want help in making the transition which they and the rest of the world require. They also want compensation for the impacts climate change is already having and will have in the future. The “G77 plus China” group of developing countries lobbied for a fund to pay for such “loss and damage”.

The Glasgow pact did not deliver all this. Plans for a loss-and-damage fund were stymied by rich countries; America, as the world’s largest cumulative emitter, is particularly worried that such moves may open the door to enormous liabilities. Although America and China made a show of agreement on some matters in Glasgow, thus attempting to reassure the world that the climate is a priority that can supersede their many differences, this was not one of the issues on which they managed to see eye to eye.

Other rich countries, including the EU, pushed back both on making up the shortfall in the \$100bn by 2020 pledge (on the ground that up-to-date data is not yet available) and on agreeing to a new post-2025 figure (on the ground that more discussion was needed). Instead plans were made for further discussions about a loss-and-damage fund and a more ambitious post-2025 climate-finance deal.

But one area where poor countries won some concessions was around financing for climate adaptation, such as building sea walls. In the Paris agreement rich countries had promised to finance mitigation and adaptation in roughly equal measure, yet only a quarter of the \$80bn raised in 2019 went to adaptation. In the Glasgow agreement rich countries pledged to at least double the amount given to adaptation by 2025. That was welcomed by the recipients. But it does nothing in itself to put the world closer to 1.5°C.

Glasgow also tested new models for financing decarbonisation in poor countries. For instance, America, Britain, EU, France and Germany agreed to mobilise a pot of \$8.5bn over the next three to five years for South Africa. In exchange South Africa has agreed to decarbonise its coal-dependent power sector while protecting the livelihoods of the 100,000 or so people who work in the industry. Progress on this approach will be monitored over the next year. If the results are promising, proponents hope it could be a template for other countries.

Agreements of this sort represent the third avenue of potential acceleration delivered at Glasgow: a greater emphasis, co-ordinated by Britain in its role as president, on moves outside the UN process by “coalitions of the willing”. These are groups of countries, companies and cities which band together and come up with their own climate targets based on action in particular sectors. Notable deals announced in Glasgow by these groupings included one on [phasing out coal power](#), one on reducing methane emissions, one on greening the financial-services industry and one on ending deforestation. In every case some big countries and companies were involved. That gave the impression that COP26 was getting many things done. But in every case some big nations were missing—the coal pledge, for instance, did not include the world’s five biggest consumers of the stuff. Nor do these multilateral processes necessarily have much to offer by way of accountability.

Even so, the newfangled coalitions could cool the future. Consider greenhouse-gas emissions in 2030. For a fighting chance at 1.5°C they need to be roughly half what they were in 2010: that means reducing annual emissions by the equivalent of between 23 and 27 gigatonnes of carbon dioxide. The emissions reductions promised in the new NDCs close that gap by only

about four gigatonnes, which is why the number-crunching done in Glasgow sees them leaving the world facing a median warming of 2.4°C.

However, calculations made following the various Glasgow announcements showed the additional gains that can be brought about by the new sectoral pledges. According to Climate Action Tracker, the pledges on coal, forests, methane and electric vehicles collectively add the equivalent of two gigatonnes to the four-gigatonne reduction achieved by the NDCs, with forests and methane achieving the largest cuts. That still leaves the cuts way below what 1.5°C needs; but it also leaves them bigger than the NDCs alone could provide. And it may be that coalitions of the willing can up their contribution further. The methane deal, for example, could have been significantly more ambitious. And putting the actions outlined in these agreements into next year's NDCs for COP27 for the countries involved would make them more accountable. Again, though, that would not in itself make those commitments bigger.

There was some other modest progress at the talks. Another part of the Paris agreement, which governs how countries and countries could buy and sell offsets, was finalised after years of wrangling. The rules closed the worst loopholes but are far from greenwash-proof. Until late in the day, the pact also seemed to be on the way to calling for a phase out of coal—a big, fuel-specific undertaking which, though not binding, would have been seen as highly symbolic. In a last-minute intervention, though, India had the wording changed so that the agreement now talks only of “phasing down” coal. This was an intervention which served decisively to sour the mood as the conference closed; it saw Alok Sharma, the British chair, weep.

It is hard to come away from a meeting where such minor verbal manoeuvring matters so much, and when countries can hold the whole process to ransom in order to get their way, with a terribly good opinion of the COP process. It is even harder to believe that such shenanigans will see the world cut its emissions far deeper by 2030 than is now planned—even if climate extremes of the sort that are now becoming increasingly common underline the need to do so. In that respect, it is hard to say that 1.5°C is alive—unless you imagine it being shocked back to life by huge projects to draw already-emitted carbon back down from the atmosphere in decades to come.

But there is still some cause for hope. The UN process does not deliver much, but it delivers some things—and the multilateral agreements which have begun to cluster around it can deliver more. And there may have been wisdom in stressing 1.5°C even if the world is not all that much closer to achieving it now than it was two weeks ago. As one delegate pointed out, what the Paris text enshrines is not the target itself but the efforts that must be pursued towards it. And every fraction of a degree that is shaved off future temperature projections can be interpreted as the result of such efforts. In that sense, at least, 1.5°C remains alive.

That will be a small comfort for those to whom greater temperature rises pose existential risks. But it is better than letting the effort slide, just as the UN-sanctioned circus of the COPs is better than leaving the world without any such forum at all.

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