

The Economist explains

What really goes on during COP climate negotiations?

The process is opaque to outsiders and often infuriating to insiders

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GLASGOW

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THE ATTENTION of the world's media is focused on COP26, the United Nations climate summit currently being held in Glasgow. Barely a week into the two-week jamboree, pledges to phase out coal power, ease access for developing countries to climate financing and cut methane emissions have made headlines. (*The Economist* is reporting on the latest announcements, news and arguments from COP26 [here](#).) But the most important negotiations are still to come. And they will take place not in the public eye, but behind closed doors. How does diplomacy at COP26 really work?

COPs—a wholly uninspired acronym for “Conference of the Parties”, meaning signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change—happen each year. But not all are equal. When the Paris agreement was signed in 2015, it was agreed that every five years countries would return with more ambitious plans to reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions and tackle [global warming](#). Because the coronavirus pandemic caused COP to be cancelled in 2020, this year is one of these “big COPs”. “Small COPs”, held in the intermediary years, tend to focus on laying the groundwork for negotiations.

COP26 began, as all COPs do, with a ceremonial opening plenary. That was followed by two days of world leaders on stage talking about climate change, concentrating either on what their countries intended to do about it (if rich) or on the dire consequences they face (if poor). Afterwards, the remaining days typically have themes—such as finance and energy—and see politicians and business leaders stepping up to announce various new pledges, coalitions and projects. Outside the doors, activists rage against superficial commitments and rally against political inaction.

Despite the well-publicised hoopla, much of the action occurs off-stage. Once heads of state leave, members of each country's delegations begin negotiating, drafting papers that set out their positions on various issues. These meetings should be watched over by accredited “observers”—normally from civil-society groups like NGOs, many from the developing countries most affected by climate change—who are meant to hold decision makers to account. This year, to much annoyance, almost all observers have been shut out of the negotiating rooms because of covid-19 restrictions.

The draft texts are written in the strange, sterile language of international diplomacy and an inordinate amount of time is spent on wording: debates on whether something “should” or “will” happen can stretch on for days. They also end up littered with square brackets, which denote areas where there is significant disagreement. For example, the text for Article 6 of [the Paris agreement](#)—a controversial clause about global carbon markets—began COP26 with 373 bracketed sections, after talks failed to reach any consensus on it at COP25 in Madrid. As of November 5th the bracket-count was down to 296.

By the start of the second week, delegates will hand over proposals to their ministers and lead negotiators. The real haggling now begins and arguments will rumble on for the rest of the conference. The aim is to draft a document that all countries agree on: a big task and one that sometimes results in disfiguring compromises. In Copenhagen in 2009, after talks broke down in acrimony, the final statement did little more than recognise the scientific case for limiting global warming (no commitments to reduce emissions were achieved). The process can bring hardened diplomats to tears. In Bali in 2007, after almost a fortnight of squabbling, Yvo de Boer, the diplomat in charge of the summit, wept while trying to tell delegates of the importance of reaching an agreement. (Rather than praise for his passion, this outburst earned Mr de Boer the nickname “the Crying Dutchman” in the press.)

Negotiations normally continue until the last possible moment, often stretching into the wee hours of the final weekend. The hosts—in Glasgow’s case the British government, led by Alok Sharma, a minister and the summit’s president—will scuttle between warring factions, trying to smooth over countries’ concerns. Eventually some kind of accord will be read out at the final plenary. Some countries will celebrate; others will point fingers at those they think haven’t done enough. This year, unlike the conclusion of COP21 in Paris in 2015, will have no overarching “Glasgow agreement”. Instead, if everything goes right, there will be some more ambitious and detailed plans for how countries will move towards limiting global warming to less than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, as set out in the Paris agreement.

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