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COP26: The Glasgow Climate Conference

Last updated December 6, 2021

The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow (Conference of the Parties or COP26), held from October 31st to November 13th, was billed as "the world's last best chance" to prevent the worst consequences of the climate crisis. Global temperatures have already [surpassed](#) 1°C above pre-industrial levels, and scientists have warned that crossing the 1.5°C threshold risks unleashing far more severe climate change effects on people, wildlife, and ecosystems. Keeping global warming below 1.5°C, however, is an ambitious goal.

Unfortunately, COP26 faced numerous challenges even before talks began. Power imbalances between rich and poor nations are always on display at the UN climate talks, but COP26 was especially controversial this year because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions, a lack of vaccine access, and the high costs of attendance meant that many delegates and indigenous leaders from developing countries were [unable](#) to participate in this year's negotiations in Glasgow. Equally problematic, those from civil society organizations and indigenous peoples who were able to travel to Glasgow were often [shut out](#) of negotiating rooms and the venue entirely.

The Paris Rulebook

A key issue on the agenda at COP26 included technical talks to finalize the Paris Agreement's implementation guidelines. Known as the "[Paris Rulebook](#)," these implementation guidelines address issues such as the preparation of countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Under the Paris Agreement, countries are required to produce a national plan beginning in 2020 outlining the policies and measures they will take to address the climate crisis. Countries adopted the majority of the Paris Rulebook at COP24 in Poland three years ago, but three issues remained unresolved: deadlines, transparency, and carbon markets.

- **Transparency:** Stamping out cheating and strengthening accountability was a major item on the agenda at COP26. Malaysia's report to the UN, for example, claimed its trees were absorbing carbon [four times faster](#) than those in neighboring Indonesia, allowing the country to cut 73% of emissions from its bottom line. At COP26, parties adopted an "enhanced transparency

framework” with common reporting tables and universal reporting standards. Previously, developed and developing countries used different reporting systems that varied in detail.

- **Common Time Frames:** Under the Paris Agreement, countries are legally required to undertake “Nationally Determined Contribution” (NDCs) toward the global response to global change. However, the Paris Agreement does not define a common implementation period, or “time frames” when countries issue new carbon targets. As a result, the first round of NDCs covers time frames that end in either 2025 or 2030. Developing and climate-vulnerable countries generally [preferred](#) five-year timeframes to avoid lock-in of insufficient commitments, while countries such as Russia and Japan consistently argued for 10-year time frames. Under the compromise, every five years countries will publish 10-year target plans. Transparency rules considering the reporting of emissions cuts were resolved too. The first “global stocktake,” which occurs every five years and is designed to assess global climate progress, is scheduled to take place in 2023.
- **Carbon Markets:** After five years of unsuccessful talks, COP26 finally saw the finalization of the Article 6 “rulebook” governing international carbon markets and non-market cooperative approaches. On carbon markets, negotiators faced multiple challenges including how to avoid double-counting and how to prevent the carryover of pre-2020 Kyoto Protocol credits. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, Article 6.4 markets are required to ensure an “overall mitigation in global emissions.” In the end, the final rules contained strong language preventing double-counting but allowed for significant carryover of credits.

Another issue on the agenda was determining what percentage of credits would be put aside to benefit the world’s atmosphere rather than a particular state and its NDC. This is known as the “cancellation rate.” Ultimately, negotiators chose 2% - the lowest option on the table. The final Article 6 text also included an agreement on the “Share of Proceeds” from carbon trading that will be set aside and paid into the UN Adaptation Fund. Negotiators agreed this will be set at 5% of all emissions reductions created through the trade of voluntary emissions credits under Article 6.4 of the Paris Agreement. In a blow to developing countries, this 5% share of proceeds will not apply to national transfers under Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement and contained weakened language protecting human rights. Article 6 has received widespread [criticism](#) from international environmental groups who argue that carbon trading is a tool that polluting companies use to greenwash their climate inaction and avoid cutting emissions. Net-zero pledges and carbon

offsets cannot replace real domestic emissions reductions and the phase-out of fossil fuels.

Climate Finance

In 2009, wealthy countries at the Copenhagen Climate Conference (COP15) agreed to provide \$100 billion per year in climate financing by 2020, with funding split equally between mitigation and adaptation projects. COP26 began with the open acknowledgment that developed countries [failed](#) to live up to their climate finance commitments. In 2019, countries only delivered [\\$80 billion](#) in climate finance to developing countries, and the vast majority of funding has come in the form of high-interest commercial loans, export credits, and private investments that deepen the indebtedness of developing countries.¹ Funding for adaptation was especially lagging. Less than \$20 billion was directed to adaptation projects in 2019. The following funds were committed at COP26:

- **Mitigation:** Countries announced \$413 million in funding to the [Least Developed Countries Fund](#), hosted by the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), which assists low-income countries in their response to rising sea levels and extreme weather exacerbated by the climate crisis.
- **Adaptation:** Countries announced \$450 million for “locally-led adaptation approaches” and the [UN Adaptation Fund](#) raised a record \$356 million in new pledges. The final agreement also includes a goal for developed countries to double current adaptation funding levels to \$40 billion by 2025.

Overall, COP26 did not result in significant increases in climate finance. While the final text does commit developed countries to double funding for adaptation, it does not provide for any increase in overall funding levels above the \$100 billion bottom line. Moreover, [analysis](#) indicates that the United States, more than any other country, is responsible for missing these targets. The World Resources Institute conservatively [estimates](#) that the U.S. should contribute 40–47% of the \$100 billion in climate finance, but its average annual contribution from 2016 to 2018 only totaled \$7.6 billion.

In April, U.S. climate justice organizations released the “[Fair Shares NDC](#),” a model calling for even bolder action based on a widely accepted analysis of U.S. responsibility and capacity to contribute our “fair share” of global climate action. Specifically, the policy document targets 195% reductions below 2005 levels by 2030,

¹ OECD analysis of overall climate funding relies on a flawed accounting methodology. Of the \$78.9 billion that developed countries reported mobilizing in 2018, only \$12.3 billion was provided as grants.

split between domestic action and international support, and calls on the U.S. to provide \$800 billion in climate finance to developing countries from 2021 to 2030 split equally between mitigation and adaptation. Members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus sent a [letter](#) to President Biden spotlighting the Fair Shares NDC as a model to guide the administration's revision of its Paris Agreement pledge. Thus, while the Biden Administration committed itself domestically to the [Justice40 Initiative](#), a government-wide pledge to commit 40% of federal investments in clean energy and climate infrastructure to disadvantaged communities, the same level of leadership is still lacking at the international level.

Loss and Damage

The single most controversial topic on the agenda at COP26 was “loss and damage,” which refers to the unadaptable impacts of the climate crisis such as sea level and temperature rises as well as extreme weather events such as hurricanes and cyclones. The climate vulnerable country of [Madagascar](#), for example, is only responsible for 0.01% of global emissions but currently faces a drought-induced famine exacerbated by climate change. Developing countries argue that wealthy countries have a moral responsibility to compensate them for this type of destruction caused by the climate crisis.

The concept of loss and damage was first included as a standalone issue in the Paris Agreement but, much to the protests of developing countries, the article included a clarification that no legal basis existed for liability or compensation. At COP26, the G77 plus China, a group of 130 developing countries representing 85% of the world's population, fought for the establishment and funding of a “loss and damage facility.” Unfortunately, wealthy countries such as the U.S. and Australia staunchly opposed funding for loss and damage, citing concerns that it could open the door to potentially unlimited financial liabilities. Rich countries' blocking of efforts to help vulnerable nations out of fear that it would open them up to potentially limitless liability meant negotiators at COP26 failed to secure a major breakthrough, especially of badly needed trust.

In the end, no commitments to funding mechanisms were secured. Loss and damage was mentioned 12 times in the final Glasgow text and countries promised to continue talking about funding for “loss and damage associated with the adverse impacts of climate change.” The only minor concession from rich countries was a commitment to provide procedural funding for the [Santiago Network](#), a body that aims to build technical expertise on dealing with loss and damage.

Coalitions of the Willing: COP26 Side Agreements

A wide array of so-called “[side agreements](#)” were also announced on the sidelines of the Glasgow Climate Conference. These voluntary initiatives included ceasing the use of coal, ending international support for fossil fuels, preventing deforestation, and reducing methane emissions. Key voluntary pledges included:

- **Methane:** More than 100 countries pledged to reduce methane emissions by 30% by 2030 under the [Global Methane Pledge](#), an initiative led by the United States and the European Union. Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that is 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere. It is responsible for approximately 10% of domestic emissions and 20% of global emissions. Recent [modeling](#) suggests that this agreement could reduce warming by -0.12°C by 2100.
- **Coal:** 28 countries, including Poland, joined the [Powering Past Coal Alliance](#), an international coalition dedicated to phasing out the use of coal in a “sustainable and economically inclusive way, including appropriate support for workers and communities.” A total of 48 countries have now signed on as members. However, China, India, and the United States — the three biggest global emitters — have yet to sign on as members. The United States’ unwillingness to sign the international pledge contrasts sharply with President Biden’s domestic climate leadership and the administration’s commitment to ensuring a just transition for hard-hit coal communities. In January, President Biden signed an [Executive Order](#) establishing an interagency working group to [address](#) the economic needs of “coal, oil, gas, and power plant communities” co-chaired by National Economic Council director Brian Deese and National Climate Adviser Gina McCarthy. Australia and Japan, two other major users and producers of coal, have also so far refused to join the group. Coal is the single largest contributor to climate change.
- **Electric Vehicles:** On “Transport Day” at COP26, more than 100 governments and vehicle manufacturers committed to exclusively selling [zero-emissions vehicles](#) by no later than 2035 in leading markets and by 2040 in the rest of the world. While the states of New York, Washington, and California, as well as American automakers Ford and General Motors, signed onto the declaration, the United States did not. Here again, the United States’ actions at the international level contrast sharply with President Biden’s domestic agenda. President Biden previously signed an [Executive Order](#) to reach 50% electric vehicle sales by 2030 in the U.S., and the [Build Back Better Act](#) invests heavily in electric vehicles and charging infrastructure. Other large auto

manufacturing countries that did not sign on include Japan, Germany, and China, as well as leading automakers Honda and Toyota.

- **Fossil Fuel Finance:** 39 countries, including the United States, signed a [statement](#) pledging to end direct and public finance of international fossil fuel projects by the end of 2022. The agreement contained numerous loopholes, mirroring those President Biden carved out earlier this year after signing an [Executive Order](#) to end international financing in carbon-intensive energy projects. Subsequent [guidance](#) from the Treasury Department left open the door for "narrow support for natural gas" and carbon capture projects. A core group of 7 countries also launched the [Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance](#) (BOGA), the first-ever international coalition committed to ending oil and gas extraction. The state of California and the Canadian province of Québec also signed as associate members. The "core members" committed to ending all leasing for the production or exploration of oil and gas, while associate members like California committed to making "concrete steps" to reduce oil and gas production.
- **Deforestation:** More than 100 countries signed an agreement to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030. The agreement includes \$19.2 billion in public and private funding to support land conservation efforts. The countries that signed the pledge include Canada, Brazil, Russia, China, Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the U.S. They are home to approximately 85% of the world's forests.
- **US-China Cooperation:** In a surprise move, the U.S. and China announced a bilateral cooperation agreement. While the agreement was light on details, China pledged to draw down its coal consumption while both countries agreed to share technology and announce new national targets by 2025. U.S.-China cooperation on climate is critical given that the two countries together account for roughly [40%](#) of all greenhouse gas emissions on earth. China invests significantly in low-carbon energy technologies, such as wind turbines, solar panels, and electric vehicles, and these "decarbonizing" technologies will make significant progress in mitigating climate change. However, the U.S. must work with China to incorporate these technologies into infrastructure as well as provide assistance to countries around the world to utilize low-carbon technologies.

China's President, Xi Jinping, did not [attend](#) COP26. Only China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, traveled to Glasgow. In the U.S., lawmakers have cited concerns about a military threat from China as further reason to support increases to the bloated [Pentagon budget](#), which only lines the pockets of

weapons contractors and exacerbates climate change. The Pentagon is the world's [largest](#) emitter of greenhouse gases. The [U.S. Pacific Command](#) alone is responsible for 22% of the Pentagon's energy use. Increasing [military infrastructure](#) in the Asia-Pacific region would only increase this number and contribute to further pollution.

These side agreements, while encouraging, are non-transparent, unverifiable, and unenforceable. Because they carry no penalty if broken, their successes have been far fewer than their failures, a point that UN Secretary-General António Guterres rightly characterized as a "[deficit of credibility](#)" at the beginning of COP26. The Glasgow declaration on deforestation, for example, follows the failed 2014 [New York Declaration on Forests](#), where 39 countries promised to halve deforestation by 2020. Instead, deforestation increased by 20% between 2016 and 2020. These side agreements, usually led by rich countries, also often distract from the main negotiations and undermine the formally democratic process of the UNFCCC.

Looking Forward: Success and Failure at COP26

Negotiations went into overtime, but the final agreement largely failed to resolve these issues. COP26 failed to secure a path to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. One breakthrough, however, was the first-ever inclusion of the term "fossil fuels" in the final text of the [Glasgow Climate Pact](#), with countries called upon to "phase down" the use of coal and fossil fuel subsidies. India and China were scapegoated for weakening the final text of the agreement from the "phase out" to "phase down" of unabated coal and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies, but earlier in the week were criticized for offering stronger language about an "[equitable transition](#)" that was endorsed just days earlier at the G20 in Rome. This suggested language was swiftly rebuffed by wealthy, natural gas-producing countries such as the U.S., Canada, and Russia who have taken longstanding positions against equity in UN negotiations.

Pledges at COP26 are still expected to [result in 2.4°C of warming](#) this century. And while this is better than the predicted 2.7°C predicted before the summit, it will still see countries overshoot scientists' goal of 1.5°C and even the Paris Agreement's goal of "well below" 2°C. Nonetheless, the mere mention of fossil fuels and other successes at COP26 will depend on whether countries can close the expanding "credibility gap" and follow through on their pledges.

At the domestic level, any meaningful U.S. effort to combat the climate crisis must acknowledge its own Department of Defense's contribution to pollution and global warming. Emissions by the Pentagon alone are greater than the [total emissions](#) of many small and medium-sized countries. If the Pentagon were a country, it would rank the [55th](#) largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Representative Barbara Lee

(D-CA) has introduced a [resolution](#) that would require the Pentagon to outline clear emission reduction targets consistent with the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreements as well as the FY2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) ([H.R.4350](#)). President Biden’s climate leadership, commitment to Justice40, and the investments in the “Build Back Better Act” cannot achieve our climate targets alone. Meaningful domestic efforts to curb emissions must also include reining in the runaway Pentagon budget responsible for building weapons that burn excessive amounts of fossil fuels.

CPC thanks ***ActionAid USA, Center for International Environmental Law, Friends of the Earth, Oakland Institute, and Oil Change International*** for their comments and insights.