

'The end of coal is nigh': Expert assesses the results of the World Climate Summit in Glasgow

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Jochem Marotzke, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology in Hamburg. Credit: David Ausserhofer/MPG

At the COP26 world climate conference in Glasgow, the signatory states

were able to reach an agreement after lengthy discussions. We spoke with Jochem Marotzke, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Meteorology, about the results of the conference in Glasgow, the importance of such climate summits and agreements, and the sense of hopelessness and despair that climate change causes in some young people.

Prof. Marotzke, are you satisfied with the outcome of the World Climate Change Conference in Glasgow?

At the end of the day, I am quite satisfied. Of course, there is still much that hasn't been achieved. This conference has not decisively brought us to the 1.5 degree target. But some things are moving in the right direction. This is the first time that coal, coal-fired [power generation](#), and fossil fuels have ever been explicitly mentioned in a UN document on [climate](#) change. That is a huge step forward. Even in the scientific status reports I am involved in, the term '[fossil fuels](#)' does not appear. And when it was once almost accidentally included in a text, Saudi Arabia immediately made sure that it got removed again.

Was the decision on fossil fuels not watered down a bit too much in the end?

At the last minute, China and India managed to get it accepted that it should be called 'phase down' instead of 'phase out.' That is, of course, a weakening. The fact that coal-fired power generation has been replaced by 'coal-fired power generation without carbon capture' is also a limitation. But if you look at this point closely, it doesn't make much difference. Because at present, the capture and underground injection of CO₂ is so expensive that coal-fired electricity is no longer competitive. For me: "The end of coal is nigh." This is a beacon of hope.

However, the call to phase down fossil fuels leaves many opportunities not to do so.

We have that in all these agreements. And I think that if these possibilities didn't exist, we wouldn't have reached an agreement at all. It is perhaps worth mentioning two points here. For me, the biggest breakthrough in Paris was not the commitment to the 1.5 degree or 2 degree target. Even though this naturally had a highly important signaling effect. Even more important, in my view, was the fact that the emission reduction was broken down from a global blanket statement in Paris to the 196 individual states. That was huge. Because otherwise, you always have the problem of free riders when you just say we 196 states all have to achieve this together. We now have a similar substantiation with the mention of fossil energy sources in the Glasgow Agreement.

However, the national contributions are not legally binding.

We actually paid that price. These are only declarations of intent. But if you look at the situation in Germany, you might understand why even declarations of intent can be helpful. The Federal Constitutional Court made substantial reference to the Paris Climate Agreement when it ruled that efforts in CO₂ reduction were insufficient. But you can also see: Both the current grand coalition and the expected future traffic light coalition are finding it quite difficult to decide on and implement specific steps. That's where a government needs maneuverability. Such a joint declaration at least builds up pressure for action in the individual countries.

Will it be enough?

A government can now claim that its country has committed itself to a

goal and must therefore implement certain measures—even if they are unpopular. There is one more specific point in this context. This is in the Glasgow Agreement: So far, there have been many announcements of wanting to be climate neutral at some point in the distant future. But the scientific community agrees that the years up to 2030 will be crucial. If we want to make progress on decarbonization by the middle of the 21st century, we need to set a decisive course now. In Glasgow, it was decided that by 2022, the signatory states must update their voluntary commitments on which climate targets they want to achieve by 2030. Glasgow has thus tightened the thumbscrews. I expect that this will bring significantly more than formulating goals in several decades. Because that is about the policy that is being made today and which is verifiable. There are no sanctions yet. But no state likes to be shamed for not keeping its promises. Even Saudi Arabia and China are averse to this. Against this backdrop, it is remarkable that governments such as Saudi Arabia have also agreed—even though they will lose billions to trillions of dollars through decarbonization because their assets will be devalued. Because the oil and coal that remain in the ground are no longer worth anything. This is not something that can be taken lying down. Overall, much more came out of Glasgow than I expected.

So the world climate summits do bring something for climate protection after all? Sometimes you get the impression that the Fridays for Future movement has achieved more for this than the annual conferences.

Presumably, the protagonists of the Fridays for Future movement think so too. But you only have to look at what the movement demands. That we decarbonize the economy rather quickly and achieve the 1.5° target. Where do these goals come from? From the Paris Agreement. Those who claim that the conferences produce only hot air forget their own historical foundations.

During the conference in Glasgow, various decisions and declarations of intent were announced. For example, on deforestation or methane emissions. And there was the declaration by China and the US to work together against global warming. How important are these steps?

All these points do not even appear in the final declaration. However, I am divided on some of these announcements: Of course, it is good that China and the US have announced their joint action. But we first have to see how much that is worth. And when the Brazilian government, which has driven deforestation more than anyone else, endorses a declaration against deforestation, it should make us somewhat skeptical. The reduction of methane emissions by 30% by 2030 should also not be overestimated. Methane is important. But don't think for one second that it will solve the climate problem. This is essentially a CO₂ problem.

We have now talked about CO₂ reduction in industrialized and emerging countries. However, aid to developing countries was also a very controversial issue. What has been achieved in this respect?

It was, of course, shameful how the rich countries addressed this issue at the Glasgow negotiations. They wanted to provide 100 billion dollars per year by 2020. It's not that much money per year when you look at the financial and economic power behind it. But according to the industrialized countries themselves, we are now only at just under 80 billion dollars. So it is important that this has now been written into the agreement again—even if 2024 is not very ambitious for this. It is also good that the adjustment contributions are to be doubled by 2024 compared with 2019. Until now, people have been reluctant to talk about adaptation because they feared that otherwise too little would be done to

slow climate change. But whether you like it or not, you have to face the question of what happens if we miss the targets of the Paris Agreement, especially the 1.5 degrees. Not to mention that climate change is already here and is becoming stronger. It is therefore clear that the damage from climate change will be greater and that we need to do more to adapt, especially in developing countries.

Is this only about the developing countries? In an interview in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung at the beginning of 2020, you said that Germany will only be indirectly affected by climate change. For example, through migration from regions that have become uninhabitable.

That came across as very misleading. It was an existential threat. But of course Germany is also affected. The risks are increasing and the burdens are also increasing—no question at all. But we are not being deprived of our livelihoods in Germany.

The people in the Ahr valley probably see it differently.

When I talk about there being no existential threat, I am of course referring to Germany as a whole. There is no guarantee for each individual region. But they would not exist even without climate change. Because, of course, extreme events can cause terrible devastation.

Are you not downplaying climate change?

You raise a point that is quite important to me but which is difficult to communicate: Climate change is a very serious problem. But I think it's

bad when [young people](#) in particular see their survival made impossible by it. This can be understood as appeasement. But it is not meant that way. After the interview, I received letters from young people who very specifically believe that in the foreseeable future they will no longer have a chance of surviving climate change. I find this appalling and also unfounded. It is often implied that the disaster is completely unavoidable. And that is simply not the case—it is my duty as a scientist to say that too. It is not at all appropriate to retreat into despair and hopelessness. And that is good news after all. In my experience, however, it is just as difficult to reach the people who are on the disaster train as it is to reach the people who doubt that there is any man-made climate change or the need to do something about it.

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