

What did COP26 achieve?

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Credit: public domain

COP26, the UN climate conference in Glasgow, wrapped up on Saturday.

The two-week conference brought together diplomats from nearly 200 nations to refine the details of the Paris Agreement, to keep alive the

hope of limiting human-caused global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and to set more ambitious goals to cut emissions, adapt to [climate change](#), and provide aid to developing countries suffering the worst [climate](#) impacts. Scholars from the Columbia Climate School shared their expertise in many events and discussions around these topics—learn more [here](#).

How successful were the COP26 negotiations? "I would say it is a real mixed bag," said John Furlow, director of the Climate School's International Research Institute for Climate and Society.

The overall consensus is that countries signed onto a variety of pledges and agreements that, while promising much-needed progress, do not go far enough in cutting emissions and lack the details required to ensure the words are transformed into action. Below, we go through several of the meeting's most notable promises and shortcomings.

The Glasgow Climate Pact

Negotiators from nearly 200 countries unanimously signed the Glasgow Climate Pact. In it, they agree to ramp up efforts to cut planet-warming emissions, and call on wealthy countries to double their funding to protect poorer nations who have contributed the least to climate change, yet suffer the deadliest consequences.

The [new deal](#) falls short of the meeting's objectives. As the New York Times points out, the agreement is still unclear on how much and how quickly each nation should cut its emissions. The pact does not provide a clear plan to limit warming to 1.5 degrees, or even 2 degrees, and critics say it does not do enough to help vulnerable countries.

"Fossil fuels were mentioned in the text for the first time in the history of COPs, which could be considered a small win," said Mélody Braun, a

senior staff associate at the International Research Institute for Climate and Society, "but the language was watered down by India and the US and went from 'phase out coal and phase out fossil fuel subsidies' to 'phase down unabated coal power and phase out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.'"

She added that although the agreement recognizes the need for wealthier countries to fund climate adaptation and mitigation in developing countries, it "fails to secure a loss and damage fund, which was identified as a condition for success by a big part of the civil society and least developed countries." Developing countries are still waiting for the \$100 billion per year that was promised under the 2015 agreement, she said.

On the positive side, the agreement reiterates the importance of fighting climate change and establishes that nations are not doing enough to prevent a global catastrophe. It calls on nations to strengthen their pledges to reduce emissions by the end of 2022, three years earlier than previously laid out in the Paris Agreement. And it solidifies details around how countries submit and report their climate progress under the Paris agreement, which should encourage transparency, said Furlow, and "make it harder for countries to fudge their actions and numbers."

Promises and pledges

Before COP26, the world was on track to heat up by 2.7 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. New commitments announced at COP26—several of which are highlighted below—could limit warming to 2.4 degrees, if countries follow through on their plans. That's still too much warming, but Furlow noted that the Paris Agreement is meant to be carried out in a stepwise fashion such as we're seeing.

"This year's commitments should reduce warming by a few tenths of a

degree," he said, "and the next round should reduce it further."

Quitting coal

More than 40 countries [pledged to quit coal](#), the dirtiest fossil fuel and the world's largest source of carbon dioxide emissions, in the 2030s. Quitting coal is essential for limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees C.

"Phasing out coal is a low-hanging fruit in climate policy, due to its high emissions and high costs," Korey Silverman-Roati, a fellow at the Columbia Climate School's Sabin Center for Climate Change Law, wrote in a recent [blog post](#). He warned that the new pledge "set vague timelines—in the 2030s or thereafter for [major economies](#), and in the 2040s for everyone else—so more concrete deadlines will likely be needed to make the commitment effective."

Notably, some of the world's largest coal consumers—including China, India, the U.S. and Australia—did not sign on to the pact, which will also limit its impact. However, the New York Times notes:

The Biden administration did join an agreement ... to end financing for "unabated" oil, gas and coal in other countries by the end of next year. Unabated refers to power plants that burn [fossil fuels](#) and discharge the pollution directly into the air, without any attempt to capture the emissions.

Ending deforestation

More than 140 countries vowed to [end deforestation](#). The deal includes the U.S., Brazil, Russia, and China, and other countries that together comprise over 90% of the world's forest cover. The BBC reports that the deal includes \$19 billion in financing, some of which "will go to

developing countries to restore damaged land, tackle wildfires and support indigenous communities."

However, notes Silverman-Roati, "In 2014, leaders made a similar pledge in the New York Declaration on Forests, but since then, tropical primary forest loss has increased and tree cover gains have been insufficient." Significant effort will be needed to ensure a better outcome with this new agreement.

Slashing methane emissions

More than 100 countries have signed on to the Global Methane Pledge, an initiative that aims to cut methane emissions by 30% by 2030, compared to 2020 levels. Led by the US and the EU, the list of signatories are responsible for nearly half of the world's methane emissions.

Methane is a greenhouse gas that is more potent than carbon dioxide, but it remains in the atmosphere for less time—only about 12 years. That makes it a great target for limiting global warming in the short term. As Reuters notes, "A U.N. report in May said steep cuts in methane emissions this decade could avoid nearly 0.3 degree Celsius of [global warming](#) by the 2040s."

However, China, Russia, and India—key methane-emitters—have not signed onto the pledge. "Significant work remains to be done to expand the number of countries involved, detail the ways countries will meet the commitment, and verify that cuts have actually occurred," writes Silverman-Roati.

Phasing out new gasoline-powered vehicles

At least six major automakers and 30 national governments have pledged to phase out gasoline- and diesel-powered cars and vans by 2040. The deal includes automakers Ford, Mercedes-Benz, General Motors and Volvo and countries such as Britain, Canada and India. The US, China, and Japan did not sign on.

Transportation accounts for [29%](#) of US greenhouse gas emissions, and about 20% globally.

U.S.-China agreement

China and the US—the world's two biggest polluters—announced an agreement to work together to cut emissions in the coming decades. The agreement is short on details, but considering the rivalry between the two countries, seems to be a promising result.

Net-zero pledges

COP26 President Alok Sharma noted that a few months ago, only about 30% of the global economy had net-zero emissions pledges for the coming decades. Now that number is close to 90 percent, the Washington Post reports. "By any measure, that is progress," said Sharma.

Now those pledges need to transform from mere promises to detailed plans, said Braun. "Net zero commitments announcements have to be accompanied with real emission reduction pathways and sufficient resources in order to be relevant—which is sadly not the case of every country."

What comes next

Overall, the negotiations that led to the new Glasgow pact are actually a small but necessary part of COP, said Braun—a lot of the climate action happens at the local, regional, national level. "We are running out of time, and out of trust in what can realistically be achieved by a negotiation text that has to be approved by every country."

To her, the most important part of COP is what happens in the corridors, streets, and side events, rather than in the negotiation rooms. "COP is an incredible and unique incubator for bottom-up action through the gathering of activists, experts, civil society, Indigenous communities, and various stakeholders from all around the world, who bring and share their expertise and experience to strategize together on how to develop, support and fund new partnerships, projects, technologies, capacity building programs, climate education and climate empowerment efforts, at local, regional, national, international levels. Those are leading to immediate change and action that is directly supporting adaptation, mitigation and loss and damage goals, with climate justice as a central concern."

Speaking with Bloomberg News, Michael Gerrard, founder of the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University, echoed the sentiment that what happens next depends on what happens with the individual countries. "The pledges made by countries don't automatically translate into action. That requires new laws at the domestic level. The key decisions are made in the national capitals, not at the U.N. meetings," he said.

All talk?

Considering the voluntarily, non-legally binding nature of the agreements and their lack of detailed plans, the results of COP and similar meetings have often been criticized as being "all talk." It remains to be seen whether the new commitments will lead to substantial change.

But in the words of US climate envoy John Kerry, as quoted in the Washington Post: "The alternative is you don't say anything, you don't do anything. You don't have any promises. You don't have any commitments. And you're sitting there just waiting for the deluge."

As the conference drew to a close, Sharma said that the conference had fulfilled its pledge to "keep alive" the hope of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees. "But the pulse is weak. It will only survive if we keep our promises."

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