

The ultimate guide to why the COP26 summit ended in failure and disappointment (despite a few bright spots)

November 15 2021, by Robert Hales, Brendan MacKey



Opening ceremony of the World Leaders Summit at the COP26 Climate Change Conference 2021, Glasgow, Scottish Event Campus, Scotland. 1 November 2021. Credit: Dean Calma / IAEA, CC BY 2.0

After two hard-fought weeks of negotiations, the Glasgow climate change summit is, at last, over. All 197 participating countries adopted the so-called Glasgow Climate Pact, despite an 11th hour intervention by India in which the final agreement was watered down from "phasing out" coal to "phasing down."

In an emotional final speech, COP26 president Alok Sharma apologized for this last-minute change. His apology goes to the heart of the goals of COP26 in Glasgow: the hope it would deliver outcomes matching the urgent "code red" action needed to achieve the Paris Agreement target.

At the summit's outset, UN Secretary-General António Guterres [urged countries](#) to "keep the goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius alive," to accelerate the decarbonisation of the global economy, and to phase out coal.

So, was COP26 a failure? If we evaluate this using the summit's original [stated goals](#), the answer is yes, it fell short. Two big ticket items weren't realized: renewing targets for 2030 that align with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and an agreement on accelerating the phase-out of coal. But among the failures, there were important decisions and notable bright spots. So let's take a look at the summit's defining issues.

We've made serious breakthroughs [@COP26](#).

We've kept 1.5 alive and made huge progress on coal, cars, cash and trees.

And while there is still so much that needs to be done to save our planet, we'll look back at COP26 as the moment humanity finally got real about climate change. pic.twitter.com/Rf91HN4fS3

— Boris Johnson (@BorisJohnson) [November 13, 2021](#)

Weak 2030 targets

The goal of the Paris Agreement is to limit global temperature rise to well below 2 degrees Celsius this century, and to pursue efforts to limit warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Catastrophic impacts will be unleashed beyond this point, such as sea level rise and more intense and frequent natural disasters.

But [new projections](#) from Climate Action Tracker show even if all COP26 pledges are met, the planet is on track to warm by 2.1 degrees Celsius—or 2.4 degrees Celsius if only 2030 targets are met.

Despite the Australian government's recent climate [announcements](#), this nation's 2030 target [remains the same](#) as in 2015. If all countries [adopted such](#) meager near-term targets, global temperature rise would be on track for up to 3 degrees Celsius.

Technically, the 1.5 degrees Celsius limit is still within reach because, under the Glasgow pact, countries are asked to update their 2030 targets in a year's time. However, as Sharma said, "the pulse of 1.5 is weak."

And as Australia's experience shows, domestic politics rather than international pressure is often the force driving climate policy. So there are no guarantees Australia or other nations will deliver greater ambition in 2022.

Phase down, not out

India's intervention to change the final wording to "phase down" coal rather than "phase out" dampens the urgency to shift away from coal.

India is the world's [third-largest](#) emitter of greenhouse gases, after China

and the United States. The country relies heavily on coal, and coal-powered generation is expected to [grow by 4.6%](#) each year to 2024. India was the most prominent objector to the "phase out" wording, but also had support from China.

And US climate envoy [John Kerry](#) argued that carbon capture and storage technology could be developed further, to trap emissions at the source and store them underground.

Carbon capture and storage is a controversial proposition for climate action. It is not proven at scale, and [we don't yet know](#) if captured emissions stored underground will eventually return to the atmosphere. And around the world, [relatively few](#) large-scale underground storage locations exist.

And it's hard to see this expensive technology ever being cost-competitive with [cheap](#) renewable energy.

In a crucial outcome, COP26 also finalized rules for global carbon trading, known as Article 6 under the Paris Agreement. However under the rules, the fossil fuel industry will be allowed to "offset" its carbon emissions and carry on polluting. Combined with the "phasing down" change, this will see fossil fuel emissions continue.

It wasn't all bad

Despite the shortcomings, COP26 led to a number of important positive outcomes.

The world has taken an unambiguous turn away from fossil fuel as a source of energy. And the 1.5 degrees Celsius global warming target has taken center stage, with the recognition that reaching this [target](#) will require rapid, deep and sustained emissions reductions of [45% by 2030](#),

relative to 2010 levels.

What's more, the pact emphasizes the importance to mitigation of nature and ecosystems, including protecting forests and biodiversity. This comes on top of a side deal struck by Australia and 123 other countries promising to end deforestation by 2030.

The pact also urges countries to fully deliver on an outstanding promise to deliver US\$100 billion per year for five years to developing countries vulnerable to climate damage. It also [emphasizes](#) the importance [of transparency](#) in implementing the pledges.

Nations are also invited to revisit and strengthen the 2030 targets as necessary to align with the Paris Agreement temperature goal by the end of 2022. In support of this, it was [agreed](#) to hold a high-level ministerial roundtable meeting each year focused on raising ambition out to 2030.

The [US and China climate agreement](#) is also cause for cautious optimism.

Despite the world not being on track for the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal, momentum is headed in the right direction. And the mere fact that a reduction in coal use was directly addressed in the final text signals change may be possible. But whether it comes in the small window we have left to stop catastrophic [climate](#) change remains to be seen.

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