

COP26: A PIVOTAL MOMENT FOR THE PLANET

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Introduction

From 31 October to 12 November 2021, the UK will host the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow. Approximately 30,000 delegates, representing over 200 countries, will convene to forge an agreement on the global action necessary to tackle climate breakdown. This conference is a critical moment for international climate diplomacy.

This paper proceeds in three parts. In section I, there is an analysis of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the seminal COP21. Section II turns to COP26 and examines the four primary objectives of the summit. It argues that there are significant challenges to be overcome if the UK is to realise its goals for COP26. The final part of the paper, Section III, analyses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international climate negotiations and argues that a more equitable global vaccine rollout may strengthen climate negotiations at COP26.

Section I

Since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) entered into force in 1994, government leaders and plenipotentiaries have met annually, with the aim of preventing 'dangerous' human interference with the climate system and to stabilise greenhouse gas emissions.¹ The Conference of the Parties is the apex decision-making body of the UNFCCC. The annual COP summits have produced a range of outcomes over the course of the last twenty-seven years. The most successful treaty to emerge in this period was the Paris Agreement.

The Paris Agreement, which was adopted by 196 Parties at COP21, in 2015, remains the most consequential international climate accord. It is a legally binding international treaty which seeks to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and to no more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels.²

¹ UN Framework Convention on Climate Change <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-convention/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change>

² UN (2015), The Paris Agreement, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

The Paris Agreement also aims to reach a global peak of greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible and to achieve global climate neutrality by mid-century. This framework has

had a catalysing effect and many signatories to the accord, such as the European Union, have used the Paris Agreement as a template to further other energy and climate plans.

Figure 1.³

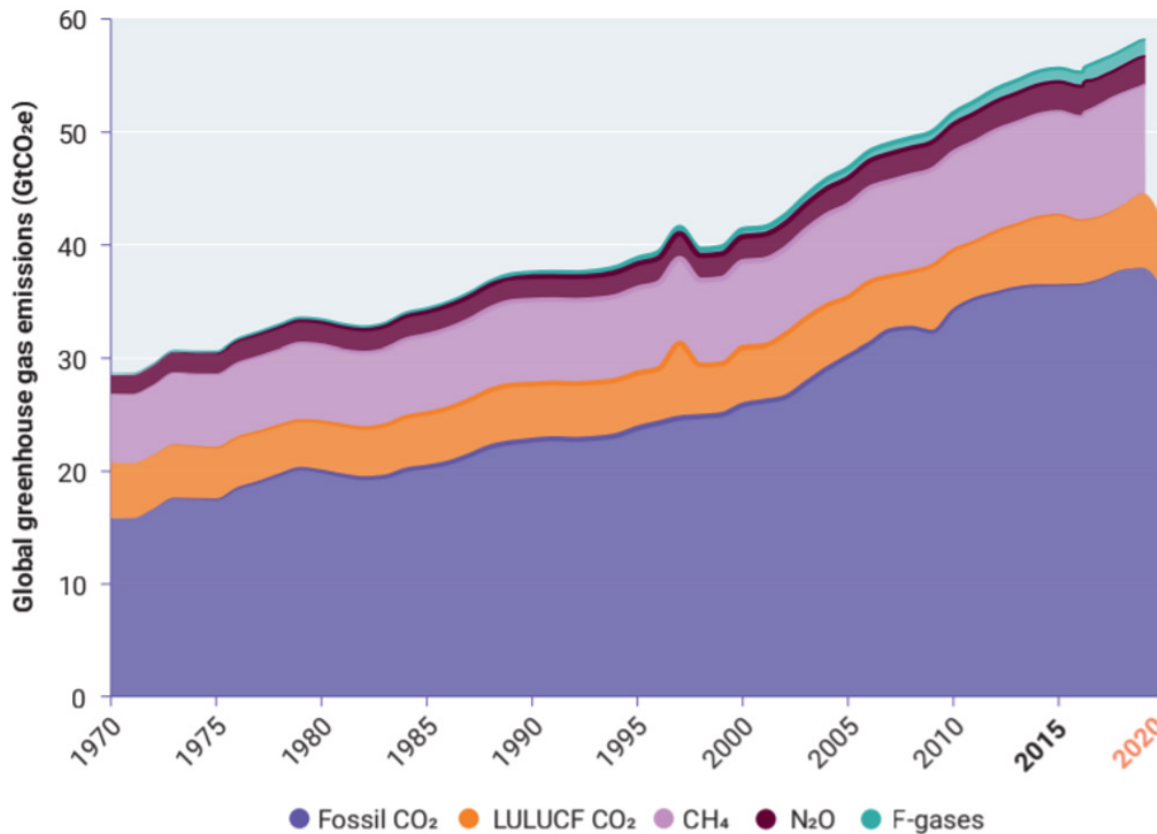


Figure 1 highlights the steep increase in global greenhouse gas emissions in the period between 1970-2020.

The Paris Agreement has been considered “a landmark”⁴ because for the first time, a binding climate agreement brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious climate action and adapt to the effects of climate change. It adopts “a ‘bottom-up’ and non-standardised approach, where parties themselves set their national emissions

reduction targets and communicate these to the UNFCCC in the form of a 5-year cycle of nationally determined contributions.”⁵

As per Article 4 of the Paris Agreement, each party must submit their first set of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) by 2020, which are to be updated every five

³ Figure 1 shows global greenhouse gas emissions from all sources, from 1970-2020. Emissions Gap Report 2021: UN Environment Programme, *The Heat Is On: A world of climate promises not yet delivered* <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2021>

⁴ UNFCCC (2021), ‘The Paris Agreement’, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf

⁵ Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) ‘Raising Climate Ambition at COP26’ *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, pp.4-5. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-ahberg-et-al.pdf>

years thereafter. This deadline was revised to October 2021, on account of the coronavirus pandemic. As of this 12 October 2021, 140 countries – nearly 70% of signatories, accounting for 57% of global emissions – had submitted their NDCs to the UNFCCC.⁶

Section II

The upcoming COP26 summit is the first opportunity for a global stocktake of NDCs and is a chance to evaluate the extent to which countries are taking sufficient action to limit global warming to 1.5°C. The window for achieving this target is closing. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) – the UN body which assesses climate science – forecasts that the world will reach 1.5°C somewhere between 2030 and 2035.⁷ Thus, the Glasgow conference takes place at a moment of planetary peril and at the dawn of this crucial decade for climate action.

The UK's Presidency of COP has four primary objectives. The paper will now turn to examine each of these goals and assess whether they are realisable at the summit in November.

Goal 1: Secure global net zero by mid-century and keep 1.5 degrees within reach

The international landscape has changed considerably since the adoption of the Paris Agreement. As of October 2021, more than

130 countries have set, or are considering, a net-zero target by mid-century.⁸ The three largest emitters of greenhouse gas emissions – China, the US, and the EU – have all pledged to become carbon-neutral. Together, these economies are responsible for 41.5% of total global emissions, while the bottom 100 countries account for only 3.6%.⁹ Hence, following through on these commitments would make a significant contribution to the effort to keep global temperatures close to the 2°C threshold. For instance, if China realises its net-zero commitment before 2060, it could avoid the release of 215 billion tonnes of CO₂ and negate 0.2°C-0.3°C of global warming this century.¹⁰

Countries need a roadmap to steer these transformations and to turn promises into policies. A major report from Chatham House finds that “most of the net-zero pledges are formulated in vague terms that are not consistent with good practice.”¹¹ Indeed, without enhanced short and medium-term targets, commitments to transition to net-zero lack credibility.

The transition to net-zero emissions by mid-century is a critical long-term strategy to safeguard a liveable climate.¹² However, to keep the 1.5°C scenario within reach, strong, rapid and sustained reductions are needed, and this requires global emissions to be cut by 50% by the end of this decade.¹³

6 World Resources Institute (2021) *Making Sense of Countries' Paris Agreement Climate Pledges* <https://www.wri.org/insights/understanding-ndcs-paris-agreement-climate-pledges>

7 Carbon Brief (2021) *Analysis: What the new IPCC report says about when world may pass 1.5C and 2C* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-what-the-new-ipcc-report-says-about-when-world-may-pass-1-5c-and-2c>

8 Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (2021) *Net Zero Tracker* <https://eciu.net/netzerotracker>

9 World Resources Institute (2020) *This Interactive Chart Shows Changes in the World's Top 10 Emitters* <https://www.wri.org/insights/interactive-chart-shows-changes-worlds-top-10-emitters>

10 Carbon Brief (2020) *Analysis: Going carbon neutral by 2060 "will make China richer"* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-going-carbon-neutral-by-2060-will-make-china-richer>

11 Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) 'Raising Climate Ambition at COP26' *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, p15. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-aberg-et-al.pdf>

12 United Nations (2021) *For a livable climate: Net-zero commitments must be backed by credible action* <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/net-zero-coalition>

13 Climate Action Tracker (2021) *Global Update: Climate target updates slow as science demands action* <https://climateactiontracker.org/publications/global-update-september-2021/>

The Emissions Gap Report 2021,¹⁴ published by the UN Environment Programme, issues stark data showing that new NDCs are thoroughly insufficient and that these 2030 pledges must be enhanced fivefold to stay on track to limit warming to 1.5°C.¹⁵

The energy sector is responsible for the largest share of greenhouse gas emissions – approximately 73% of global emissions.¹⁶ To keep the 1.5°C scenario within reach, it is essential to decarbonise the global energy system. This systemic transformation will require the accelerated phase-out of coal, the widespread electrification of global economies, and major investment in renewable energy sources.

While the scale of this challenge is significant, and the recent decision by Beijing to step up coal output is regressive,¹⁷ there are bright sparks which indicate progress in the decarbonisation of the energy system.

One such indicator of hope is the steady decline in the costs of renewable energy sources in recent years; a trend which is expected to continue. The International Energy Agency shows that annual net wind capacity is expected to grow significantly over

the coming five years while global prices are forecasted to drop concurrently – 15% in the period 2020-2025.¹⁸ Similarly, the costs associated with solar energy have dropped precipitously. Over the last ten years, the average cost of electricity from solar PV has fallen by 73%.¹⁹ Such developments in cost reductions serve the twin goals of decarbonising the electricity sector in the developed world, where emissions cuts are most urgently needed, and improving the market position of developing countries, which may lack the legacy infrastructure needed to generate clean electricity.²⁰

Goal 2: Adapt to protect communities and natural habitats

Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe.²¹ COP26 is an opportunity to forge a path to stave off further irreversible damage and destruction to the planet, and of course, to its people. It is important that negotiators at the summit recognise that the climate will continue to change, even as emissions are reduced, with devastating effects.²² Thus, adaptation measures which enhance ecosystem restoration, build resilient

14 Emissions Gap Report 2021: UN Environment Programme, *The Heat Is On: A world of climate promises not yet delivered* <https://www.unep.org/resources/emissions-gap-report-2021>

15 Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) 'Raising Climate Ambition at COP26' *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-aberg-et-al.pdf.pdf>

16 World Resources Institute (2020) *This Interactive Chart Shows Changes in the World's Top 10 Emitters* <https://www.wri.org/insights/interactive-chart-shows-changes-worlds-top-10-emitters>

17 The Guardian (2021) *China's coal plans could derail Cop26 climate ambitions, says Labour* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/13/china-coal-plans-could-derail-cop26-climate-ambitions-uk-labour>

18 International Energy Agency (2020) *Renewables 2020: Wind* <https://www.iea.org/reports/renewables-2020/wind>

19 International Renewable Energy Agency (2019) 'Global Commission on the Geopolitics of the Energy Transition', *A New World: The Geopolitics of the Energy Transition*, https://irena.org/-/media/Files/IRENA/Agency/Publication/2019/Jan/Global_commission_geopolitics_new_world_2019.pdf.

20 O'Callaghan-White, L. (2020) 'Course Correction: China is going Carbon Neutral' *Institute of International and European Affairs*. <https://www.iieta.com/publications/course-correction-china-is-going-carbon-neutral>

21 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2021) *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis Summary for Policymakers* https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM.pdf

22 UN Climate Change Conference UK (2021) *COP26 Goals* <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/>

infrastructure, and ultimately protect lives and livelihoods will be an essential element in the response to the planet's changing climate. This is particularly so for developing countries, which are most at risk from the threats of immediate and devastating climate change.

Climate risks disproportionately affect the poorest countries and people, who are more exposed and more vulnerable to their impacts.²³ It is projected that climate change will cause inequality, between and within countries, to rise further.²⁴ A recent World Bank report forecasts that climate change will drive 68 million to 135 million people into poverty by 2030.²⁵ Climate change is a major threat to poverty reduction and is a particularly grave threat for countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where most of the global poor live.²⁶

The effects of rapid-onset hazards, such as landslides, floods and wildfires, and slow-onset hazards, such as erosion and desertification, are having a considerable impact on population displacement, especially where adaptation measures are absent or lacking. Without accelerated climate action and adaptation measures, the UNHCR predicts that, by 2050, the number of climate refugees and displaced people could reach 200 million.²⁷

There are also serious implications for security. While there is a complex and

nuanced relationship between climate change and conflict, research shows that the extent to which climate change contributes to insecurity is largely determined by a state's relative ability to adequately adapt to and mitigate the worst effects of climate change.²⁸

The countries most at risk to the myriad of climate-related threats are those least responsible for this planetary crisis. As such, to arrive at a meaningful agreement on enhanced adaptation measures at COP26, there will need to be a strong climate justice dimension. The IPCC highlights that social justice and equity are core aspects of climate-resilient development pathways that aim to limit global warming to 1.5°C.²⁹ The provision of adequate levels of climate finance to developing countries is one tangible example of how the richest nations can remedy climate injustice. The paper now turns to examine this topic of climate finance, which is the focus of Goal 3 at COP26.

Goal 3: Mobilise finance

In the coming decade, unrivalled levels of public and private sector finance will be essential if the world is to move in the direction of a resource-efficient and climate-resilient future.

To deliver on the first two goals set out for COP26, developed countries must make good

23 International Monetary Fund (2021) *Linking Climate and Inequality* <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2021/09/climate-change-and-inequality-guivarch-mejean-taconet.htm>

24 Ibid.

25 The World Bank (2020) *Global Action Urgently Needed to Halt Historic Threats to Poverty Reduction* <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/07/global-action-urgently-needed-to-halt-historic-threats-to-poverty-reduction>

26 Ibid.

27 UNHCR: UK (2020) *Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and it particularly impacts the displaced* <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2020/11/5fbf73384/climate-change-defining-crisis-time-particularly-impacts-displaced.html>

28 Fitzpatrick, R. (2021) 'Climate and Security at the UN Security Council' *Institute of International and European Affairs* <https://www.iiea.com/publications/climate-and-security-at-the-un-security-council-explainer>

29 The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018) *Special Report: Global Warming of 1.5 °C Summary for Policymakers* <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/spm/>

on their promise to mobilise at least \$100 billion in annual climate finance to developing countries. In 2010, at COP16, developed countries committed to meet this target by 2020. While the final verified data are not yet available, the OECD assesses that the developed world has clearly failed to meet the \$100 billion commitment.³⁰

Climate finance mobilised by developed countries for developing countries totalled \$79.6 billion in 2019, up 2% from \$78.3 billion in 2018. While this figure marks a considerable increase from levels a decade ago, it is expected that the \$100 billion target will not be met until 2023.³¹

In July 2021, more than 50 ministers and high-level UN representatives held a pre-COP meeting to discuss their expectations of COP26. Ministers emphasised that the mobilisation of climate-aligned finance for developing countries is not only critical to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, but also to maintain trust, credibility and confidence in the UN process.³²

A key concern heading into COP26 is that developed countries have not yet shown how the \$100 billion pledge will be honoured in 2021,³³ nor have they conclusively demonstrated how it will be met in the period of 2022-2024. Failure to clarify this pathway

to the agreed levels of climate finance is creating mistrust between countries.³⁴ At the conclusion of the pre-COP ministerial meeting in July, Canada and Germany agreed to develop a collective Delivery Plan which will set a roadmap to reach the target as soon as possible.³⁵

Patricia Espinosa, Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC, emphasised that keeping the climate finance commitments to developing countries will be essential for a successful outcome at COP26.³⁶ The Chair of the Least Developed Countries Grouping, Sonam Phuntsho Wangdi, highlighted that there will be “no COP26 deal without a finance deal”.³⁷

While it is promising to see further commitments to increase levels of climate finance by an annual \$10 billion, at the recent UN General Assembly,³⁸ it is not guaranteed that developed countries will meet these new commitments. The vital pledge to mobilise a minimum of \$100 billion of climate finance by 2020 is more than a decade old, yet the world’s richest economies are still unable to honour this goal. Failure to meet current and past targets will lead to higher climate mitigation and adaptation costs in the future.

30 OECD (2021) *Statement by the OECD Secretary-General on future levels of climate finance* <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/statement-by-the-oecd-secretary-general-on-future-levels-of-climate-finance.htm>

31 Ibid.

32 UN Climate Change Conference UK (2021) *July Ministerial Chairs Summary* <https://ukcop26.org/july-ministerial-chairs-summary/>

33 Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) ‘Raising Climate Ambition at COP26’ *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-aberg-et-al.pdf.pdf>

34 Ibid.

35 OECD (2021) *Statement by the OECD Secretary-General on future levels of climate finance* <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/statement-by-the-oecd-secretary-general-on-future-levels-of-climate-finance.htm>

36 United Nations Climate Change (2021) *Patricia Espinosa Outlines the Four Keys to Success at COP26* <https://unfccc.int/news/patricia-espinosa-outlines-the-four-keys-to-success-at-cop26#:~:text=%20The%20four%20elements%20that%20will%20constitute%20a,behind%2C%20>

37 LDC Climate Change (2021) *World’s most vulnerable nations call on G7 to step up: “we cannot survive climate change without finance and stronger 2030 targets* <https://www ldc-climate.org/worlds-most-vulnerable-nations-call-on-g7-to-step-up-we-cannot-survive-climate-change-without-finance-and-stronger-2030-targets/>

38 OECD (2021) *Statement by the OECD Secretary-General on future levels of climate finance* <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/statement-by-the-oecd-secretary-general-on-future-levels-of-climate-finance.htm>

Goal Four: Work together to deliver

To keep global temperatures at no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels; to enhance adaptive capacity to climate-related events; and to deliver urgent climate finance to the world's poorest countries, global collaboration, cooperation, and coordination must improve. The fourth goal of COP26 is that the international community should rise to the challenges of the climate crisis by working together.³⁹

One key litmus test for the future of international climate cooperation will be whether the remaining element of the Paris Rulebook is agreed at COP26. While the Paris Agreement provides an overarching framework for action, the rulebook outlines the processes, guidelines and tools needed to implement it in an effective way.⁴⁰ It contains the rules which detail how the Paris Agreement will operate.⁴¹ Almost every element of the rulebook was resolved at COP24 in Poland in 2018, but the status of Article 6 has yet to be settled.⁴² This is a highly technical section of the rulebook, but without agreement at COP26, it could undermine the entire architecture of the Paris Agreement.

Article 6 of the Paris Agreement governs the rules which detail how countries can voluntarily cooperate across borders to reduce emissions.

It consists of three separate mechanisms: two based on markets and one non-market approach.

The first mechanism concerns bilateral cooperation. It would allow a country that has beaten its Paris climate pledge to sell its overachievements, such as emissions cuts or forest expansion, to another country that has fallen short of its target.⁴³

The second mechanism would create a new international carbon market, governed by a UN body, for the trading of emissions reductions created anywhere in the world by the public or private sector.⁴⁴

The third mechanism is a non-market approach and would provide a formal framework for climate cooperation between countries, where no trade is involved, such as development aid.⁴⁵

It was expected that the status of Article 6 of the Paris Agreement would be resolved at COP25 in 2019, but the parties fell short of a deal.⁴⁶ The UK has made resolving the outstanding element of the rulebook a critical objective of the climate summit. COP26 President, Alok Sharma, has tasked Singapore and Norway with carrying out informal consultations with countries and teasing out convergence, in advance of the summit, but at present, parties hold deeply entrenched and divided views on this matter.⁴⁷

39 UN Climate Change Conference UK (2021) *COP26 Goals* <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-goals/>

40 Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) 'Raising Climate Ambition at COP26' *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-aberg-et-al.pdf>

41 World Resources Institute (2019) *Why Does the Paris Climate Agreement Need a Rulebook? 7 Questions and Answers* <https://www.wri.org/insights/why-does-paris-climate-agreement-need-rulebook-7-questions-and-answers>

42 UN (2015), *The Paris Agreement*, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

43 Carbon Brief (2019) *In-depth Q&A: How 'Article 6' carbon markets could 'make or break' the Paris Agreement* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/in-depth-q-and-a-how-article-6-carbon-markets-could-make-or-break-the-paris-agreement>

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Carbon Brief (2019) *COP25: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Madrid* <https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop25-key-outcomes-agreed-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-madrid>

47 Climate Home News (2021) *'Chess game' as negotiators seek elusive carbon market deal at Cop26* <https://www.climatechangenews.com/2021/10/26/chess-game-negotiators-seek-elusive-carbon-market-deal-cop26/>

Section III

There are important geopolitical considerations, beyond the full implementation of the Paris Rulebook, which may influence the objective of enhanced international cooperation on climate change. One such issue is that of the coronavirus pandemic.

This will be the first COP to take place during a pandemic. COVID-19 has had devastating health effects across the world, but its impact has been felt most acutely in least developed countries which face a lack of health professionals and sufficient health systems infrastructure. The UN estimates that the pandemic has pushed between 119 million and 124 million people back into poverty and chronic hunger.⁴⁸

At a time when developed countries have been rolling out economic stimulus packages and borrowing at low interest rates on international markets, developing countries have been overwhelmed with extreme indebtedness. As developed countries roll out booster vaccine campaigns in autumn 2021, just 2.2% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.⁴⁹

As the recent Chatham House report highlights: "While not being pure climate policy instruments, measures that aim to boost global vaccine distribution and enhance fiscal space in developing countries are likely to have significant implications for the possibilities of achieving a high-ambition

outcome at COP26, and for the implementation of climate pledges".⁵⁰ This glaring inequity in the distribution of vaccines is strengthening North-South division and this is spilling over into climate negotiations.⁵¹

Conclusion

With just days to go, there is limited expectation of success at COP26. On Monday, 25 October 2021, British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson said that the likelihood of adopting a new agreement to strengthen commitments to counter the climate breakdown were "touch and go".⁵² The conference will take place without the presence of Chinese leader Xi Jinping, or Russian President, Vladimir Putin. While their absence may dampen hopes that meaningful achievements can be realised in Glasgow, it is worth noting that their respective representatives will be at COP to negotiate on their behalf.

The UK's Presidency of COP26 occurs at a pivotal juncture. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, NDCs must be updated to stay within reach of a 1.5°C scenario; a significant amount of climate finance is needed to enhance the adaptive capacity of those most at risk of immediate climate-related events; and a key element of the Paris Rulebook needs to be resolved to maintain the credibility of the Paris Agreement.

While success at COP26 may depend on a myriad of interconnected political, social, economic and cultural factors, there is no ambiguity

48 Reliefweb (2021) *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021* <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/sustainable-development-goals-report-2021>

49 Aberg, A. Froggatt, A. Peters, R. (2021) 'Raising Climate Ambition at COP26' *Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House*, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021-10-05-raising-climate-ambition-at-cop26-aberg-et-al.pdf>

50 Ibid, p.25

51 Ibid.

52 The Guardian (2021) *Boris Johnson says chances of Cop26 success are 'touch and go'* <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/25/boris-johnson-says-chances-of-cop26-success-are-touch-and-go>

concerning the physical basis of the current climate. The world is currently off-course to meet the 1.5°C target. Comprehensive and immediate global emissions reductions will be needed to re-orient the planet's trajectory. In the first year of the so-called decade of action, COP26 could be an important turning point in the global effort to limit climate breakdown. The outcome of this summit will be pivotal for the future direction of the planet.

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