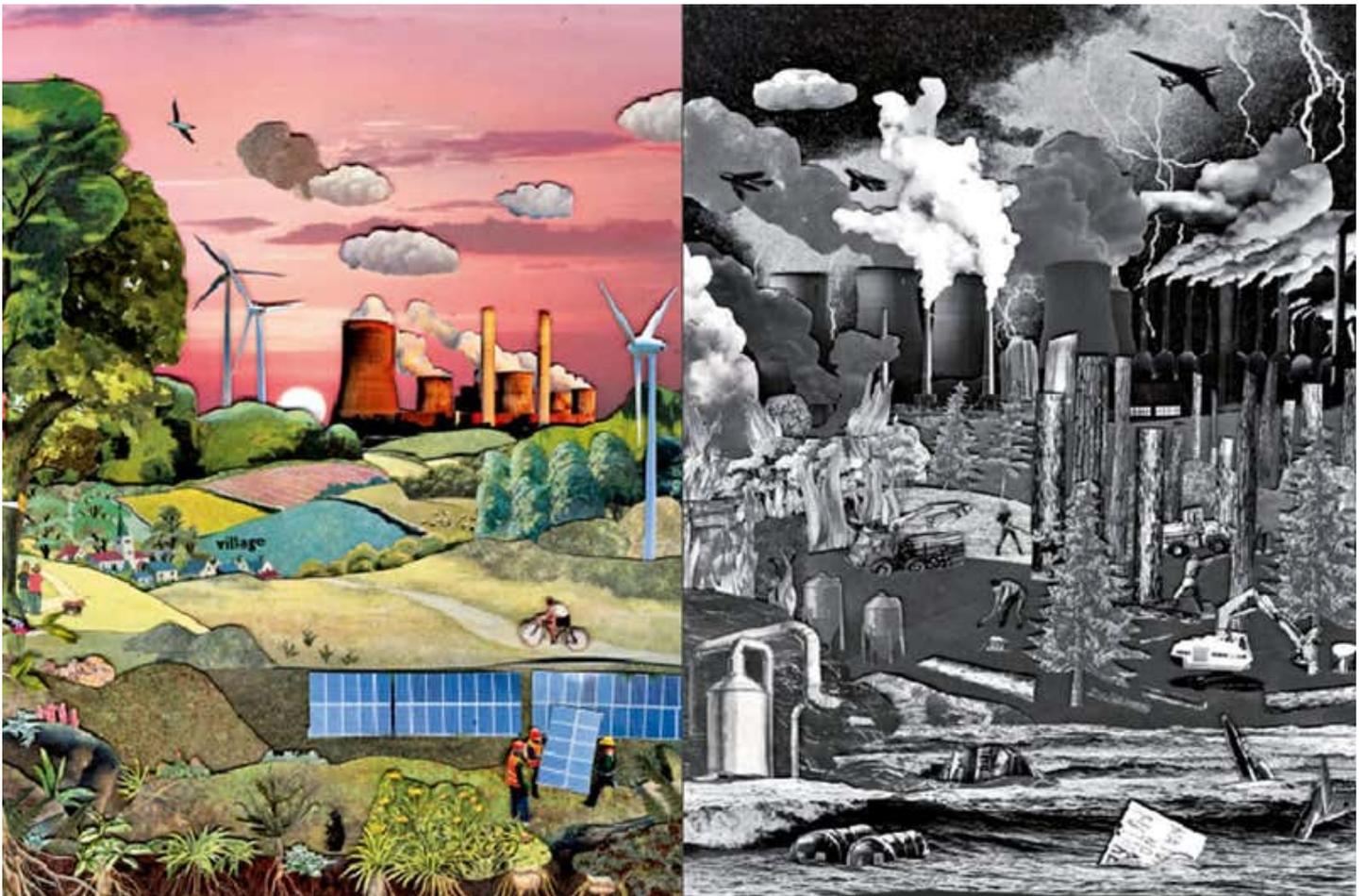


COP26: Your essential guide to the crucial climate conference

The COP26 climate summit in Glasgow is the world's last chance to spur real action on global warming. But what issues are at stake – and what does a good outcome look like?

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By **Adam Vaughan**



IT ISN'T often that international summits are pitched as a “turning point for humanity”. But that is how UK prime minister Boris Johnson described the [COP26 climate conference in Glasgow](#), which starts on 1 November, in [a speech to the UN this September](#). The question is which way we will turn. To within touching distance of a safe future climate comparable with the past 10,000 years or so that enabled humanity to flourish? Or [continuing towards a hothouse Earth with higher sea levels](#), extreme weather getting worse, more wildlife wiped out – and an incalculable burden on the well-being of future human generations?

The person charged with making the summit a success, COP26 president [Alok Sharma](#), is adamant that the fortnight-long meeting, [delayed for a year because of the covid-19 pandemic](#), can maintain hopes of [limiting global temperature rise to 1.5°C](#), the goal agreed at the [2015 Paris climate change summit](#). “I think keeping 1.5°C alive has to absolutely be the aim,” he says.

“We don't have another option. If this summit doesn't keep 1.5 degrees alive, we are in such trouble,” says [Christiana Figueres](#), former chief of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and one of the architects of the Paris Agreement. “We have only the last years of this decade to make a major, major turnaround.”

After years of tough talks, those involved will be keen to trumpet their success following the summit, whatever the result may be. But what will an outcome that is genuinely good for us and the planet look like? Read on for your guide to the key issues that will determine all our futures.

The emissions gap

The absolute biggie facing the UN and the UK, which as host of the summit has been spearheading the diplomatic effort leading up to it, is [the 20 to 23 billion tonnes of extra carbon dioxide cuts needed each year to avert truly dangerous warming](#). That is what one analysis estimates as the extra annual emission reductions needed by 2030, on top of those that countries have already pledged, if we are to avoid breaching 1.5°C. Global emissions are currently about 40 billion tonnes of CO₂.

Nearly 200 countries agreed in Paris in 2015 to “ratchet up” their plans to reduce emissions, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), with an initial deadline of December 2020. Very few met that schedule. The UK, European Union and US all submitted bolder new pledges for cuts by 2030. But some, such as Australia and Indonesia, issued new ones with the same old targets. Others, including Brazil and

Mexico, even effectively watered down their targets. Brazil said emissions in its base year of 2005 were a third higher than stated in its older plan, meaning it can emit more now and still meet its goal. The largest emitter, China, and fourth biggest, India, have yet to submit their revised plans.

The result, according to a report published by the UNFCCC in September, is that global emissions are **set to rise by 16 per cent by 2030**, on 2010 levels, instead of falling by 45 per cent, which is what's needed for a chance of staying under 1.5°C. A 16 per cent rise puts us on course for a world 2.7°C hotter by 2100, catastrophic warming that would turbocharge extreme weather, hit food production and destroy unique ecosystems such as coral reefs. Sharma concedes that the figures are “pretty sobering”.

Top of his agenda is putting pressure on G20 countries, leading economies which account for about four-fifths of global emissions, to fulfil a promise they made in July to deliver ambitious new plans in time for the summit. “What the G20 do is absolutely vital,” says Sharma. “The key issue now is how do we get these G20 nations to come forward.” India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Turkey are among G20 members with no new plan, yet.

Patricia Espinosa, the current head of the UNFCCC, argues that the UN report shows 1.5°C is still possible, because some political promises – such as Chinese president Xi Jinping saying his country's emissions will peak before 2030 – have yet to be translated to a formal plan. “The 1.5°C goal is, in my view, alive. One thing we cannot do is give up,” she says.

“No country will want to be singled out as the villain of COP26”



Wildfire threatens homes in Chino Hills, California, during October 2020

David McNew/Getty Images

Some observers say it is unrealistic to expect COP26 to single-handedly close the “emissions gap” enough to put us precisely on track for a 1.5°C world. But the summit can still do enough to keep that option open. “We can’t do all we need to do in Glasgow to get on track for 1.5°C, but we need to keep 1.5°C alive. We should not despair,” says Peter Betts at the Chatham House think tank in London. Betts is a former lead climate negotiator for the UK and EU.

Farhana Yamin, an adviser to the Climate Vulnerable Forum, a group of 48 countries particularly threatened by global warming, is less positive. “A good COP is just a misnomer. We are heading towards plus 16 per cent in terms of emissions when we should be on minus 50 per cent. That’s the reality,” she says.

Still, several veterans of climate talks think that most countries will have submitted new plans by the time 100-plus world leaders line up to give their opening speeches in Glasgow on 1 and 2 November. Some heads of state may even wait until those speeches to announce their plans. No country will want to be singled out as the villain of COP26 by failing to submit one. However, there is little expectation that laggards such as Australia and Brazil will beef up their retrograde contributions, despite Espinosa reminding governments they can revise plans at any time. One reason for hope is that countries may agree to speeding up the current five-year cycle for submitting new

emissions reduction plans. The next batch isn't officially due until 2025.

Good COP:

China and India announce NDCs that are more ambitious than their previous ones, even if they fall short of a "fair share" towards the 1.5°C goal; virtually all countries submit a plan by around the opening of the summit.

Bad COP:

China or India put forward a rehash of old plans without any extra emissions cuts; any G20 countries failing to submit a plan.

Fossil fuel squeeze

Phasing out fossil fuels isn't explicitly on COP26's agenda. It isn't even mentioned in the Paris Agreement. But if you take that accord's 1.5°C goal seriously, it implies that 89 per cent of known coal reserves, plus 58 per cent of oil and 59 per cent of gas, **must stay in the ground**.

Diplomatic efforts are focusing on four ways to put the squeeze on fossil fuel companies. First is securing coal phase-outs in the OECD group of 38 mostly high-income countries. Germany is one outlier here, proposing an end date as late as 2038 **an issue in its recent national election**. A measure of success of the summit will be how many countries commit to phasing out coal. In June, **five more joined an existing list of 35 nations**. One thing that is unlikely to happen at the summit, but **crucial to reining in warming**, is big coal users such as China and Indonesia announcing a timeline for retiring ageing and polluting coal plants.

Second is cutting finance for new coal power stations worldwide. Pressure ahead of COP26 has already secured a big win, as **China said on 22 September it would end coal financing beyond its borders**. Bernice Lee at Chatham House says although the move was anticipated, it isn't painless. "Credit where it is due. China was the largest public financier of coal projects overseas, so this really closes an important loop after South Korea and Japan made the move [ending coal finance]," she says.

A third priority is cutting finance from public banks, export credit agencies and multilateral development banks to oil and gas. Denmark and Costa Rica have blocked future oil and gas production and are **crafting an alliance of other countries to do the same**. The fourth lever is an effort to get more countries to follow the **UK's lead among major economies in setting an early date for banning sales of new petrol and diesel cars**.

Depending on what is announced, and how many large companies also declare emissions reduction plans while the summit is on, the effect could be cuts equivalent to

billions of tonnes of CO₂, putting such “real economy” action on a par with countries’ national plans. “There are really good news stories in almost every sector of the economy,” says Rachel Kyte at Tufts University in Massachusetts. She says that should be celebrated, but firms and governments at COP26 also need to demonstrate that technologies to decarbonise tricky sectors, such as methods to [produce steel without using coking coal](#) and [powering ships with alternative fuels such as methanol](#), can really get beyond pilot projects.

Good COP:

Significant growth in the number of countries, regions and cities planning to phase out fossil fuels. Corporate pledges that amount to emissions reduction of billions of tonnes.

Bad COP:

Financiers and countries such as China simply reiterate pledges made before the summit.

Climate finance

In 2009, high-income countries promised that by 2020 they would give \$100 billion a year in climate finance to lower-income nations, to help them adapt to a warming world and cut their emissions. The pledge was pivotal for unlocking the goodwill and multilateralism that delivered the Paris Agreement. Yet there [was still a \\$20 billion shortfall in 2019](#), a gap that was almost unchanged from the year before. Data for 2020 isn’t yet in, but it is clear that meeting the promise by the time COP26 starts is essential to oil the wheels of the final negotiations. “If the contours of the financial package are not clearer by the time we arrive in Glasgow, that becomes the open wound,” says Kyte.

If the \$100 billion doesn’t appear, that “simply makes the credibility of the developed countries and the COP26 presidency disappear into thin air”, says Saleemul Huq at the International Centre for Climate Change and Development in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It isn’t so much the difference the money will make, which Huq calls “trivial” given the impacts countries are facing. It is a matter of trust in rich countries’ promises, given that it represents a pledge made over a decade ago. “If they still cannot deliver it, a year late in Glasgow, then simply they have no credibility to talk to anyone, about anything,” says Huq.

Sharma is acutely aware of the issue’s importance. “This \$100 billion figure has become absolutely a matter of trust in politics, but particularly in climate politics. Trust is pretty fragile. We need to rebuild this trust if we’re going to get everyone on the same page,” he says. The race is now on to close the \$20 billion gap. Denmark and the US helped in September by promising new funds, but a final accounting awaits to see if the \$100

billion materialises.

Even if met, that finance pledge only covers the years to 2025. Delegates in Glasgow will need to discuss climate finance beyond that. Those talks will not yet be about the amount of money, but what sort of considerations should be taken into account to arrive at a figure.

There is also a separate ongoing branch of the talks, the Warsaw International Mechanism, which is exploring how to address the financial hit faced by countries dealing with climate change's impacts. "We are now in the era of loss and damage," says Huq, referring to recent floods, famines and [wildfires](#). It still remains to be worked out how vulnerable countries could get more help or money to cope with everything from extreme weather to longer-term threats such as sea level rise. Huq says COP26 should make the Warsaw International Mechanism an annual high-level agenda item at climate talks.

Good COP:

The \$100 billion figure materialises by the time the conference doors open and constructive talks take place to discuss how a future finance commitment might be agreed.

Bad COP:

Fudges and promises of the money being delivered later down the line.

Adaptation in the spotlight

Adapting to climate change is the focus of day one of the second week of COP26, and will be discussed throughout by a body known as the Adaptation Committee. Adaptation to climate change, for example with better flood defences, has always played second fiddle to mitigation at these conferences, but this meeting is expected to see important discussions on a potential new goal around adaptation.

"We need to agree what we need on adaptation, on how to measure it," says Kyte. What that looks like is complicated, says Huq. That is because mitigation to keep climate change in check can be aggregated under a global goal, such as avoiding warming above 1.5°C, but adaptation will be specific to location. One country may require flood defences, a second might need to switch to growing a new crop, another may have to slow desertification. That is why some observers think the only metric that countries will be able to agree on is the amount of money given for adaptation.

Nonetheless, other ideas are being floated. South Africa has suggested trying to measure the ability of communities to cope with extreme weather, and [proposed a goal that](#)

increases that resilience by 50 per cent by 2030.

Good COP:

Agreement on a new goal for adaptation and how it will be measured.

Bad COP:

A new goal that kicks the issue of metrics down the road.

The Paris Rulebook

When COP21 president Laurent Fabius brought down the gavel [agreeing a deal in Paris six years ago](#), it was the first time that high and low-income countries had together agreed to act on their emissions. But negotiators hadn't reached a consensus on several arcane but important bits of small print. Chief among the outstanding issues surrounding the "Paris Rulebook" is Article 6, which deals with rules for a global market trading credits for carbon reductions.

"The mood of different countries can affect what is possible in the COP"

Essentially, this would allow countries that overshoot their emissions reduction targets to sell that "surplus" to other countries that might be lagging or have less capacity to cut emissions. If done right, this could be a win-win: the atmosphere doesn't care where emissions are cut, and countries and firms are given incentives to cut emissions more.

But the devil has been in the detail of the system's governance. One past flashpoint is the rule on double-counting of credits – where two parties claim credit for the same emissions reduction, such as Brazil counting avoided deforestation and Norway buying credits for that. Another point of dispute is whether credits from a previous international climate treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, could be carried over.

Agreement has proved intractable at successive summits since Paris. Sharma has warned countries are still a "way off" consensus and a breakthrough will be a "challenging task". Still, Figueres believes the impasse can be broken. "It's not simple, but it's also not rocket science," she says.

"Carbon trading could be a win-win if done right – but the devil is in the detail"

As she notes, there was a carbon market under the Kyoto Protocol, known as the Clean Development Mechanism. It was flawed: at times the price for cutting a tonne of CO₂ reached such lows it made projects unviable. Concerns were raised over how many of the projects, such as new wind farms, were "additional" to what would have happened

regardless. However, Figueres says an upgraded Clean Development Mechanism could and should be inserted into the Paris Agreement in Glasgow. “Let no one say we don’t know how to do it, because we do,” she says.

Good COP:

A breakthrough on Article 6, with agreement on common time frames for national emissions reduction plans and data reporting standards.

Bad COP:

Agreement on Article 6, but with so many compromises that few companies and countries have faith in its environmental integrity.

Putting it all together

“A key problem of this COP is defining success when you’re not going to get everything you need,” says Betts. One long-time climate talks observer, Nick Mabey at the European think tank E3G, says that if enough ambitious national emissions plans materialise and progress is made on squeezing fossil fuels through phase-outs and cutting financing for them, Glasgow will be a success. Mabey says a “stretch target” for COP26 would see countries also committing to align their short-term climate goals with their long-term ones, ensuring that the serious business of cutting emissions starts now. Another marker of an ambitious outcome would be an explicit commitment to 1.5°C being the global goal, dropping the Paris Agreement’s ambiguity of also tilting at a backstop of “well below 2°C”.

One sign of a good COP will be if the UK’s presidency of the summit is impartial and the conference runs smoothly, keeping enough delegates happy. Sharma is aware of this, describing himself as a “neutral broker”.



A message to climate leaders at New Brighton beach in Wirral, UK
-Christopher Furlong/Getty Images

Copenhagen in 2009 was a lesson in how not to run such a conference. Basic operational mishaps, such as leaving some delegates queuing for hours in the snow, led to anger. “COPs have their own dynamics. You’ve got tens of thousands of people all milling about for two weeks without sleep,” says Betts. “There is a lot of dissatisfaction in the developing world about covid, vaccine access and climate impacts. Mood can affect what’s possible in the COP.”

Sharma hopes the relationships he has built by visiting at least 30 countries in the past year will help him avoid the mood turning sour. He says his aim is to iron out the really thorny issues of the Paris Agreement before the conference hall even opens in Glasgow. Above all, he sees little alternative to a successful COP26. “We have to get this right, for our generation and future generations,” says Sharma. A bad outcome won’t stop the efforts to fight climate change. But for most observers, this is our last chance to make a convincing turn to avoid the worst.

Countdown to COP26

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