

## OPINION

## COP26: The eternally weak pulse of climate diplomacy, and what needs to change

Paul G. Harris \*

Department of Social Sciences, Education University of Hong Kong, Tai Po, Hong Kong

\* [pharris@eduhk.hk](mailto:pharris@eduhk.hk)

## Abstract

COP26 was noteworthy for a shift in attitude toward the kind of worldwide action that is essential to address the climate crisis effectively. More governments and industries are saying the right things. However, like the 25 preceding COPs, COP26 failed to reach agreement that will soon cut global GHG pollution, let alone prevent dangerous climate change. It was another example of the trudging negotiations and tenuous promises that have characterized climate diplomacy over three decades. To avoid decades more of plodding climate diplomacy, something needs to change. The twenty-sixth conference of the parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which met in Glasgow, Scotland, last November, was billed as the most important episode in climate diplomacy since the 2015 Paris Agreement. In the event, it was another example of the trudging negotiations and tenuous promises that have characterized climate diplomacy over three decades.

 OPEN ACCESS

**Citation:** Harris PG (2022) COP26: The eternally weak pulse of climate diplomacy, and what needs to change. PLOS Clim 1(3): e0000019. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000019>

**Editor:** Jamie Males, PLOS Climate, UNITED KINGDOM

**Published:** March 1, 2022

**Copyright:** © 2022 Paul G. Harris. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

**Funding:** The author received no specific funding for this work.

**Competing interests:** I have read the journal's policy and the authors of this manuscript have the following competing interests: Paul G. Harris is a member of the PLOS Climate editorial board.

COP26 made some incremental progress. Several nations strengthened their pledges to limit greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and achieve carbon neutrality by mid-century. That said, China, the source of well over a quarter of global emissions [1], intends to *increase* them for another eight years, and few nations have policies to cut their emissions quickly. COP26's formal agreement—the Glasgow Climate Pact—reaffirms the Paris Agreement's overarching objective of limiting global warming to less than 2°C [2], while being more assertive in striving to limit it to 1.5°C. Yet, that affirmation was not accompanied by concrete plans for achieving those aims.

In a remarkable first for climate agreements—remarkable because it took 30 years for this to happen—the pact mentions coal. However, it calls for phasing coal use *down* instead of phasing it *out*. The pact makes no mention of phasing down, let alone phasing out, the use of oil and natural gas, a significant problem because their use is increasing and over half of the world's energy already comes from burning them [3]. Vitality, the pact declares that nations of the Global North will soon deliver promised climate-related assistance to nations in the Global South, and that those donations will double. It also acknowledges the failure of donor nations to fulfill similar promises made over the last dozen years.

It may be too soon to declare whether COP26 was a success or failure. If one's measure of success is that GHG emissions and global warming are unlikely to be quite as bad as they

would be without COP26, then it was probably a success. If one's measure of success is concrete action to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement, let alone to end the climate crisis, then it was almost certainly a failure. If a measure of success is that aid to developing nations affected by climate change is likely to be more than it would have been without COP26, then it may turn out to be successful. If success is measured by fulfilment of past pledges by developed nations to provide that assistance, then COP26 should be classified as a failure—at least short of a radical and rapid rise in assistance very soon.

To assess COP26 rationally, it is important to have some historical perspective. Concern about the environmental consequences of rising atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) was the catalyst for three decades of negotiations leading up to COP26. When governments signed the UNFCCC in 1992, concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere were about 355 parts per million (ppm) [4], compared to 280 ppm at the start of the Industrial Revolution [5]. The overriding aim of the UNFCCC was to achieve 'stabilization of [GHG] concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' [6]. However, between 1992 and 2021, GHG concentrations *increased more than 40 percent* to over 410 ppm [7]. Global carbon emissions in 1992 were about 27 gigatons; now they are around 40 gigatons per year [8]. Consequently, dangerous interference in the climate system is underway, manifested in more deadly and damaging hurricanes, floods, droughts, wildfires, storm surges and much more.

We should be celebrating the successes of the UNFCCC on its thirtieth anniversary. Instead, GHG emissions are *still increasing* globally, and they look set to continue doing so for some years to come. Emissions certainly are not set to fall by half within eight years, which scientists tell us is essential to limit global warming to 1.5°C and thus avoid the worst impacts of climate change [9]. Indeed, even if all official pledges made at COP26 are fully implemented—an *exceedingly unlikely* prospect given the history of climate diplomacy—global warming will increase from today's nearly 1.2°C above the pre-industrial norm [10] (up by nigh on 1°C since 1992, due in large part to a tripling of the warming rate in recent decades), to around 2.5°C [11]. At that level, climate change will run riot across ecosystems and societies.

To its credit, COP26 was noteworthy for a shift toward the kind of worldwide action that is essential to address the climate crisis effectively. More governments and industries are saying the right things. However, COP26, like the 25 preceding COPs, failed to reach agreement that will soon cut global GHG pollution, let alone prevent dangerous climate change. To avoid another three decades of plodding climate diplomacy, something needs to change.

COP26 was a missed opportunity finally to meet decades of demands from nations, communities and activists for climate justice [12]. As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., in *Pathologies of Climate Governance* and especially in *Global Ethics and Climate Change*), a major weakness of climate negotiations has been their failure to take much account of the vital roles played by *people*. COP26 involved yet another debate about the relative responsibilities (and needs) of nations without directly considering people's responsibilities. This nation-centric approach hides many of the human causes (and felt impacts) of climate change and many of the resulting injustices. An example of this failure to take more account of people can be found in the COP26 debate over reparations for loss and damage. Reparations are surely required, but who should be responsible to pay for them? The answer does not begin and end with nations.

One group that escaped much official scrutiny at COP26 was the elite class of the world's richest people. The personal consumption of the richest 1 percent accounts for more than 15 percent of global carbon emissions, a figure exceeding that of all nations except China [13]. The majority of people in this class live in the North, but many of them live in the South. Those in the North are increasingly (and rightly) being asked to limit their GHG emissions, and perhaps pay carbon taxes, as part of their nations' efforts to implement the Paris

Agreement. In contrast, the rich in the South can avoid responsibility because they live in relatively poor nations to which the climate COPs have (rightly) attributed less responsibility for addressing climate change. When diplomats from the South (rightly) demand reparations for loss and damage, they are presumably doing so on behalf of their fellow citizens, including those who are rich. Those same diplomats are, in effect, also making the case that all people in the North, including the poor there, are responsible for funding those reparations. Looked at this way, it is hardly surprising that developed nations rejected formal responsibility for reparations.

The Glasgow pact invokes the longstanding principle of common but differentiated responsibilities of nations, but it says nothing about common or differentiated responsibilities of individuals, even affluent ones. Those who have benefitted the most from polluting Earth's climate system—affluent nations to be sure, but also affluent *people*—regardless of which nations they live in, could have been asked (or mandated) to help aid the nations, communities and indeed individuals that have suffered significant loss and damage. Many variations on this theme might be possible in climate negotiations, but only if diplomats focus less on the responsibilities and rights of nations and more on those of people.

Using COP27 to focus on the responsibilities of the world's richest people—the top 1 percent (regardless of their nationalities)—would be a good starting point. COP28 might extend the focus to the world's richest 5 percent, and so on. The political attraction of such an approach is that it spreads responsibility more globally without asking any nation *qua* nation to take on new responsibility. The world's rich people would resist, to be sure, but asking them to do more to address climate change might be politically popular in both the South and the North.

At the close of COP26, the United Nations secretary-general declared that humanity was 'still knocking on the door of climate catastrophe' [14]. The conference's president was more optimistic, arguing that COP26 had 'kept 1.5 within reach. But its pulse is weak' [15]. He could have said the same about the totality of climate diplomacy over three decades. Climate diplomacy is still alive, but its pulse is eternally weak. If history is any guide, it is unlikely to be vitalized anytime soon without a substantial rethink of whose interests, and whose responsibilities, ought to be addressed in negotiations. It is past time to shine a brighter light on the role played by the world's richest people.

## References

1. Rhodium Group. China's greenhouse gas emissions exceeded the developed world for the first time in 2019. 2021 May 6. Available from: <https://rhg.com/research/chinas-emissions-surpass-developed-countries/>.
2. United Nations. Paris Agreement. 2015. Available from: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.
3. BP. Statistical review of world energy 2021. Available from: <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/energy-economics/statistical-review-of-world-energy.html>.
4. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Global Monitoring Laboratory. Trends in atmospheric carbon dioxide. 2021. Available from: <https://gml.noaa.gov/ccgg/trends/>.
5. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Climate change indicators: atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases. 2021 April. Available from: <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-atmospheric-concentrations-greenhouse-gases>.
6. United Nations. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. 1992. Available from: <https://unfccc.int/documents/36938>.
7. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Global Monitoring Laboratory. Trends in atmospheric carbon dioxide. 2021. Available from: <https://gml.noaa.gov/ccgg/trends/>.
8. Ritchie H, Roser M. CO2 emissions. 2020. Available from: <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>.
9. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Global warming of 1.5°C. 2018. Available from: <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/>.

10. World Meteorological Organization. State of the global climate 2020: Provisional report. 2020. Available from: [https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice\\_display&id=21804](https://library.wmo.int/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=21804).
11. Carbon Brief. Analysis: Do COP26 promises keep global warming below 2C? 2021 November 10. Available from: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-do-cop26-promises-keep-global-warming-below-2c>.
12. Harris PG. Reversing the failures of climate governance: Radical action for climate justice. In: Bohm S, Sullivan S, editors. *Negotiating climate change in crisis*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers; 2021. pp. 243–252 Available from: <https://paulgharris.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/p.g.harrisclimatejusticeboehmsullivan.pdf>.
13. Oxfam. Carbon inequality in 2030: Per capita consumption emissions and the 1.5°C goal. 2021 November 5. Available from: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/carbon-inequality-in-2030-per-capita-consumption-emissions-and-the-15c-goal-621305/>.
14. United Nations. Glasgow compromise not enough to save planet, Secretary-General says, urging continued fight against climate crisis as world steps into 'emergency mode'. 2021 November 13. Available from: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm21022.doc.htm>.
15. Sharma, A. COP26 president remarks at closing plenary. 2021 November 13. Available from: <https://ukcop26.org/cop26-president-remarks-at-closing-plenary/>.