

31 October 2021

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## Preparing for COP26: a primer

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NEW  
DIPLOMACY  
PROJECT

### TOP LINES

- In the first two weeks of November 2021, the UK and Italy will co-host the latest iteration of the UNFCCC climate summit, COP26. Ahead of the event, this briefing sets out the key questions and debates surrounding COP26.
- The 2015 Paris Agreement set a target to limit global warming to 1.5°C over pre-industrial levels. Several other related issues - including climate finance, adaptation, loss and damage and enabling a just transition to a green economy - remain up for discussion at COP26. Time is running out to achieve these goals.
- The UK must use its Presidency of COP26 to reinvigorate the UNFCCC process, create momentum behind the 1.5 degrees goal and persuade the major emitters to increase the ambition of their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).
- Despite the severity of the climate crisis, world leaders from several of the key countries will not be attending COP26 in person. The UK must find a way to build a more ambitious consensus despite these absences.
- A frequent failing of the COP process has been its marginalisation of voices from lower income countries, who are often the most affected by the impacts of climate change. The UK must work to ensure that the needs and priorities of the global south, indigenous communities and young people from across the world are reflected at the highest level of the negotiations.
- One major area of scrutiny should be the UK government's own climate strategy. While the UK has announced an increased NDC, and a detailed net zero strategy in the run-up to the conference, high-profile decisions such as tax cuts on domestic air travel have raised concerns over the extent to which the UK can act as a role model on climate action.
- Another concern, one which goes beyond UK policy, is the extent to which the solutions championed by the COP process remain rooted in the market-based systems which caused the climate crisis in the first place. 'Green growth' may be a buzzword during COP26, but its merits are far from proven.
- On overall climate strategy, UK domestic policy and inclusion at COP26 the Labour Party must do more to challenge the government on its handling of this critical event.

## BACKGROUND

### The scale of the climate crisis

Several scientific studies in recent months have indicated that the world will exceed the parameters of global warming that the Paris Agreement deemed affordable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s annual report for 2021 found that even if extreme emissions reduction methods were implemented, the world is on course for global warming of 1.5°C within the next two decades.<sup>1</sup> If inaction on climate change continues, and the global economy pursues a 'high carbon' approach for the foreseeable future, the report warns that warming could increase to over 4°C, a rise not seen for millions of years. The remaining 'carbon budget' - an estimate of the carbon the world can emit before the 1.5°C threshold is met - stands at around 400 gigatonnes. At the current average rate of emission, this would be exhausted in the next 10-15 years, justifying the international focus on 2030 as a key target date for emissions reduction. Crucially, the IPCC report reaffirms the scientific consensus that climate change is inextricably linked to human actions.

While much of the discourse around climate change is future-focused, the impacts of warming are already being felt across the world. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 283.3 million people were forced to flee their homes in the wake of an extreme weather event between 2008 and 2020.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, air pollution kills an estimated 4.2 million people each year.<sup>3</sup> A recent Chatham House report set out the near-term climate impacts that policymakers should be most worried about, listing among them the threat climate change poses to food security, migration flows and infrastructure in low and middle income countries.<sup>4</sup> The authors make the crucial point that, while developing countries are likely to bear the heaviest burden, the 'cascading' impacts of extreme weather events or disruption caused by infrastructure destruction and forced displacement will have devastating consequences for global supply chains, significantly harming wealthier countries. The report also predicts that these impacts will become increasingly 'baked-in' the longer that action on emissions reduction is delayed.

In summary, the climate crisis is real, man-made and accelerating. Its effects are already being felt across the globe, leading to strain on our economies, health systems, borders, infrastructure, public services and, above all, taking countless lives. The longer that action to reduce carbon emissions is delayed, the harder it will be to prevent dangerous levels of global warming and the associated impacts. For these reasons, COP26 is rightly being framed as a pivotal moment for global cooperation on the climate crisis.

### The UK's climate strategy

The current government has won plaudits from some circles for its stance on 'green' issues. It is true that the UK's current climate targets are more ambitious than ever before. In December 2020, the UK announced an updated NDC which committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 68%

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<sup>1</sup> IPCC, '[AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis](#)', 9 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> IDMC, '[Global Internal Displacement Database](#)', accessed 27 October 2021.

<sup>3</sup> WHO, '[Air Pollution](#)',

<sup>4</sup> Chatham House, '[What Near-Term Climate Impacts Should Worry Us Most?](#)', 19 October 2021.

compared to 1990 levels by 2030, across all sectors of the UK economy.<sup>5</sup> This was supplemented at the time by communiqués on adaptation and climate finance, two of the major agenda items of COP26. In more recent documents such as the Integrated Review, climate change is presented as a fundamental challenge to the UK's national security, and international climate action as a site for extending Britain's global influence.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, the current government is approaching the climate crisis as one that permeates across many policy areas.

In keeping with the wider international approach to climate action, the UK is deeply wedded to the concept of green growth, which holds that the climate crisis can best be addressed by the global economic system reorienting itself towards more sustainable activities. However, critics have pointed out that there is little evidence that the market-based solutions encompassed by green growth can meet the 1.5°C warming threshold, and that in fact the answer may lie in the concept of 'degrowth', whereby the assumption that economic development can continue exponentially is challenged.<sup>7</sup>

The UK government is certainly seeking to position itself as a leader on climate action. This was seen rhetorically through the Prime Minister's speech at the UN General Assembly.<sup>8</sup> In more substantive terms, the government's latest 'net-zero strategy' set out a detailed plan for policies which could contribute to achieving the UK's net zero by 2050 target. Some of the key policies announced included:

- Ending the sale of new petrol and diesel-powered cars and vans by 2030;
- Phasing out fossil fuel-based energy sources by 2035;
- Investing in hydrogen production as a renewable fuel source;
- Providing grants to install heat pumps in 90,000 UK homes over the next three years.

Elsewhere, however, other short-term policy decisions are undercutting the UK's reputation on climate change. The Autumn budget, announced on 27 October 2021, included a tax cut for some domestic flights which called into question the government's commitment to sustainable transport systems. The Chief Executive of the Rail Industry Association also lamented that more was not done to set out a net zero railway in the UK.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the government-whipped rejection of an amendment to the forthcoming Environment Bill - which would have prevented water companies from pumping raw sewage into the UK's rivers - has brought greater attention to the destruction of the country's biodiversity. On the international stage, leaked communications from within the UK Cabinet Office suggest that the government toned down their climate credentials in order to secure a trade deal with Australia, a country with a troubling stance on the pace and urgency of climate action.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the current government's strategy fails to engage meaningfully with issues of climate justice, particularly in its lack of a credible vision for developing sustainable jobs for

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<sup>5</sup> BEIS, '[The UK's Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement](#)', 12 December 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Duraid Jalili, '[The Integrated Review: A New UK Vision for Climate Security?](#)', *Defence-in-Depth*, 31 March 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Jason Hickel and Giorgios Kallis, '[Is green growth possible?](#)', *New Political Economy* 25:4, 17 April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Prime Minister's Office, '[PM Speech at the UN General Assembly](#)', 22 September 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Global Railway Review, '[UK rail industry responds to Autumn Budget 2021 and Spending Review](#)', 27 October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> BBC, '[UK "cut climate pledges" to clinch Australia trade deal](#)', 9 September 2021.

low-income workers in high-emitting industries. All of these examples suggest that the UK's ability to act as a climate action role model at COP26 may be limited by its domestic policy platform..

## WHAT ARE THE PRIORITIES FOR COP26?

At a summit of this scale, with so many different actors and coalitions, ascertaining priorities can be a complex exercise. *Carbon Brief* has produced a detailed, live tracker of the various stakeholders and the aspects of the UNFCCC agenda they are pursuing.<sup>11</sup> The COP26 presidency has outlined key agenda items, which are discussed below.

### Mitigation - keep 1.5 alive

The COP26 presidency's stated ambition is to renew the focus on reducing the scale of global warming in line with the 1.5°C target set out in the Paris Agreement. While the science suggests that the prospects for success in this regard are receding, building an international consensus around climate mitigation will be central to any of the summit's positive outcomes. Within the mitigation discussions, key agenda items include making progress on the phase-out of coal, deepening investment in renewable energy sources, accelerating the transition to 'green' vehicles and addressing the continuing scourge of deforestation. This last objective has been given prominence in recent weeks by the UK negotiating team, and it may prove one of the more tangible outcomes from the summit providing countries like Brazil can be persuaded to engage with the proposed policies.<sup>12</sup>

### Adaptation - build resilience to climate impacts

Acknowledging that climate change is already impacting vulnerable communities across the globe, another priority is to strengthen adaptation and resilience systems. This issue is of particular importance to low-income countries which, in many cases, are the worst and disproportionately affected by the climate crisis.<sup>13</sup> Within the adaptation agenda, countries must find ways to collaborate on building infrastructure, early-warning systems and response mechanisms in the event of climate-related natural disasters. They must also take steps to protect and restore ecosystems damaged by extractive economic practices. One initiative which may gain traction at COP26 is the Adaptation Action Coalition, developed by the UK alongside Egypt, Bangladesh, Malawi, the Netherlands, Saint Lucia and the UN.<sup>14</sup> This is a collective effort to share expertise and resources targeted towards adaptation. So far, 38 other countries have signed up to the coalition. With 2022's COP27 likely to be held in a climate-vulnerable African country, the adaptation issue will be a prominent part of the handover between the two summits.

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<sup>11</sup> Simon Evans and Josh Gabatiss, '[Interactive: who wants what at the COP26 climate change summit?](#)', *Carbon Brief*, 29 October 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Jess Shankleman and Isis Almeida, '[U.K. Spearheads Plan to Stop Deforestation at COP26](#)', *Bloomberg*, 23 October 2021.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Bangladesh is leading international efforts on adaptation, as summarised by H. E. Muna Tasneem, '[Episode 12: Managing the impacts of climate change](#)', *The Climate Briefing* [podcast], 28 April 2021.

<sup>14</sup> FCDO, '[Adaptation Action Coalition: an overview](#)', 5 August 2021.

## Finance - deliver longstanding promises

At COP15, hosted by Denmark in 2009, high-income countries committed jointly to create an annual fund of \$100 billion to support climate action worldwide. Mobilising these funds has proven extremely difficult - indeed, the \$100 billion target has not been achieved in a single year since. The lack of effective finance has been a significant obstacle to climate action, particularly within low-income countries which are currently incentivised to pursue high-emission industrial strategies in order to grow their economies. The historic major emitters are expected to bear the bulk of financial responsibility but have been reticent to deliver on their 2009 commitments. Meanwhile, worldwide state-led subsidies for the fossil fuel industry have continued at a startling scale (\$5.9 trillion in 2020 according to the IMF).<sup>15</sup> International financial institutions, governments and private investors all have a part to play in achieving the \$100 billion target. In recent weeks this part of the COP26 agenda has received a boost, with US President Biden pledging to increase his country's contribution to more than \$11 billion per year.<sup>16</sup> This development may spark a series of similar enhanced commitments during the summit, but there is still a long way to go.

## Cooperation - agree how to implement the Paris Agreement

The 2015 Paris Agreement was a turning point in global climate action, setting out targets for limiting global warming and establishing the new system of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) which allows countries to update their climate action at their own pace and within their own means. At the heart of the new agreement was a framework for future COP summits, and a 'plan-implement-review' cycle for individual countries to increase the ambition of their NDCs. At COP24 in Katowice, negotiators developed what has become known as the 'Paris Rulebook' - a detailed set of rules for implementing Paris. One key aim of COP26 is to finalise and approve the Rulebook, with a few outstanding questions remaining around transparency, international carbon markets and how to ensure that targets such as 1.5°C are still achievable within the NDC framework.

## WHAT COULD SUCCESS LOOK LIKE AT COP26?

Days out from the conference, many commentators are cautioning against expecting too much from COP26. 2021 is a significant year as it represents the first test of the 'ratchet mechanism' - in which countries submit new NDCs on a five-year cycle with the intention that these increase in ambition. The number of countries which honour their Paris commitments and update their ambition will be a significant metric for understanding positive outcomes at COP26. At the time of writing 148 countries had submitted updated NDCs ahead of the summit, 85 of which had increased their ambition in terms of emission reductions compared to the previous iteration.<sup>17</sup> Within that second figure, however, there were causes for concern. China - one of the leading global carbon emitters -

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Parry, Simon Black and Nate Vernon, '[Still Not Getting Energy Prices Right: A Global and Country Update of Fossil Fuel Subsidies](#)', *IMF*, September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Oli Millman, '[Biden vows to double aid to developing countries vulnerable to climate crisis](#)', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Find the latest data via the '[NDC Enhancement Tracker](#)' from *Climate Watch*.

has disappointed observers by outlining a plan which would see emissions peak in 2030 and reach net zero several decades later, a timeline which many see as incompatible with the 1.5°C target.<sup>18</sup> It seems unlikely, by current estimates, that the combined NDCs of the COP26 participants will keep 1.5°C alive. Nevertheless, the extent to which that target is reaffirmed in Glasgow could be significant for future summits.

Beyond mitigation, the climate finance and adaptation aspects of the agenda could be the site of real progress. If President Biden's financing announcement can be used to cajole other wealthy nations into honouring their Copenhagen commitment and meeting the \$100 billion pledge then that in itself could be a powerful legacy of COP26. A delivery plan recently produced by the German and Canadian governments alongside the OECD predicts that the finance goal will be met by 2023, and that major progress should be expected in the next two years.<sup>19</sup> On adaptation, the wider adoption of the Adaptation Action Coalition would be a major achievement, as would progress on the so-called 'loss and damage' mechanism designed to help countries respond to the impacts of climate change. Within the cooperation agenda, resolving the outstanding questions around the Paris Rulebook would again represent significant progress, particularly in regards to principles of transparency and data.

Other, less agenda-focused questions will also determine the success of COP26 from the perspective of the UK government. In the post-Brexit context, the UK is attempting to forge a new brokering role for itself. The Integrated Review name-checked the G7 and COP26 summits as early test cases of the Johnson government's convening power. If the Prime Minister and COP26 President Alok Sharma can be seen to facilitate significant progress then this could be seen as a positive outcome. For the reasons suggested above, however, this broker role could easily be undermined by short-term domestic political decisions. Ultimately, success may depend less on the UK's diplomatic strengths and more upon the willingness of more prominent world leaders such as President Biden to push forward the changes that are required.

Past COP summits have suffered from their exclusion of a sufficiently wide range of stakeholders. Traditionally marginalised voices from indigenous communities, climate vulnerable countries, displaced populations and global youth need to be brought into the negotiations in a meaningful manner which transcends tokenism. COVID-19 travel restrictions and the exorbitant costs of attending the summit in Glasgow have already prevented many less affluent stakeholders from participating, and the government should have done more to mitigate this. The extent to which those who could attend in person are effectively and inclusively engaged should be another key success metric.

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<sup>18</sup> Fiona Harvey, Jonathan Watts and Vincent Ni, '[China's new climate plan falls short of Cop26 global heating goal, experts say](#)', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2021.

<sup>19</sup> OECD, '[Forward-looking Scenarios of Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2021-2025](#)', 25 October 2021.

## AREAS FOR SCRUTINY

Labour have an important role to play in monitoring the government's delivery of COP26. In particular, the party must focus on the following areas:

- The extent to which the UK government-led COP26 Presidency meets its own self-defined goals on mitigation, adaptation, finance and cooperation;
- The extent to which the government's own climate strategy aligns with the global agenda, particularly with reference to areas such as domestic air travel, energy provision and natural habitat preservation in which the UK currently lags behind its own rhetoric;
- The extent to which under-represented voices are included in the UNFCCC negotiations;
- How far the UK government is engaging with the climate justice agenda, including ensuring a just transition to a green economy;
- The broader logistical handling of COP26 - including administration, labour relations, public infrastructure and immigration - and its effects on the UK's soft power.

*This briefing will be followed after COP26 by a more thorough examination of the outcomes and prospects for opposition scrutiny on climate action.*

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