



THE DEMANDS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH: How COP 26 Failed to Address Loss and Damage

What is the UNFCCC's COP?

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was signed into force in 1994, with its ultimate objective of "stabilization of greenhouse concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic human-induced interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened, and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.¹

The Convention's most anticipated annual global meeting is the Conference of the Parties or the COP. The COP is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention, with 197 participating nations and territories. Parties to the Convention review the implementation of the UNFCCC, including institutional and administrative arrangements. During these meetings, Parties review all the participating countries' national communications² and emission inventories. They also assess the effects of the

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measures taken and the progress made toward achieving the Convention's ultimate objective, which is to prevent "dangerous" human interference with the climate system.^{3,4}

The COP has met annually since 1995. Its 21st session (COP 21) held in Paris, France in December 2015 produced one of the most historic international climate agreements – the Paris Agreement.⁵ The Agreement mandates all UNFCCC member nations in undertaking ambitious targets on climate change mitigation, adaptation, and finance.

Last November 2021, the United Kingdom (UK) hosted COP 26 in Glasgow, after two years of postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It brought together 120 world leaders and over 40,000 registered delegates from all over the world, consisting of 22,274 attending party delegates, 14,124 observers, and 3,886 media representatives.⁶

What transpired during the meeting?

After two weeks of intense talks and negotiations, the Parties reached a consensus in finalizing the remaining elements of the Paris Agreement (e.g., the Paris Rulebook) and adopting the Glasgow Climate Pact that aims to turn the 2020s into a decade devoted to climate action and support.⁷

COP 26 also revisited climate pledges made in COP 21 in 2015 and identified the following steps to moving forward:^{8,9}

- 1 EMISSIONS.** Scientists claimed that temperature rise should be kept at 1.5°C in order to prevent a "climate catastrophe"; however, current pledges (Nationally Determined Contributions/NDCs) can only commit to limiting global heating to about 2.4°C. The Glasgow Climate Pact called on countries to craft stronger national action plans that will be presented in 2022, instead of 2025 which was the original timeline. Countries also requested for an annual NDC Synthesis Report from UNFCCC to gauge the present levels of action against targets.

2 COAL. Coal is responsible for 40% of the annual carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Given its many dire impacts on the environment, there has been a growing global movement calling to phase out its use. Despite this, COP 26 agreed to a provision calling for a “phase down” of coal power and a phase out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies. The phasing down of coal instead of phasing it out is due to an intervention by the two leading coal-producing countries – China and India. Member countries have yet to set a firm date when inefficient fossil fuel subsidies shall be phased out completely.

3 CLIMATE FINANCE. Developed countries have fallen short on their pledge to deliver US\$100 billion annually from 2020 to 2025 to developing countries. After expressing “regret” over their failure to do so, said countries promised to meet their target by 2023. Insufficient funding would mean that developing countries would be handicapped in their efforts at enhancing their resilience and adaptive capacities towards addressing the climate crisis, thereby causing continued damage to lives, property, and the environment.

Finance firms managing at least US\$130 trillion also agreed to back clean technology – e.g., investing in renewable energy and directing funds away from fossil fuel-burning industries. Some countries, through the Glasgow Pact, also called for a doubling of finance to support developing countries in adapting and building their resilience to the impacts of the climate crisis. However, they admitted that this will not provide all the funding that poorer countries need. And until there are no concrete plans made for these programs, they will remain as a greenwashing scheme of private corporations and the more developed countries.

4 DEFORESTATION. Trees absorb vast amounts of CO₂ and thus are vital to the health of our planet, and play a crucial role in the battle against the climate crisis. A total of 137 countries committed to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030. The pledge is funded by US\$12 billion in public and US\$7.2 billion in private monies. Executives from 30 financial institutions also committed to eliminate investments in activities linked to deforestation, e.g., clearing of forests to make way for palm plantations. Countries, however, failed to discuss how provisions of the pledge will be implemented and enforced.

5 METHANE. Member countries agreed to cut 30% of their methane emissions by 2030, as this greenhouse gas (GHG) is currently responsible for about a third of human-generated heating. Again – China and India, along with Russia – refused to join the pledge; these countries are among the three biggest methane emitters.¹⁰

6 CARBON MARKETS. In completing the so-called Paris Rulebook, norms related to carbon markets were discussed. This will allow countries that are struggling to meet their emission targets to purchase emission reduction points from other nations that have already exceeded their own targets. According to specialists, the decisions on the carbon market (Articles 6.2 and 6.4) are extraordinarily unclear and they have yet to decode what they mean, and how implementers would translate them in practical terms. Due to this vagueness, countries can

double-count and claim credits for the same emission-reducing activities twice.

7 LOSS AND DAMAGE. Countries agreed to strengthen the Santiago Network – a group that connects vulnerable countries with providers of information and knowledge, technical assistance, and other resources to address climate risks. The Glasgow Dialogue was also launched to discuss arrangements for supporting such activities. While this is a welcome effort, it only touched on the technical assistance needed for loss and damage and not the financial arrangements.

The discussions and agreements made in COP 26 reflect each country's agenda, political will, and climate-related commitments.



*“Despite all the ramped-up efforts and financial pledges, **decisions reached were still not radical enough to effectively change the global landscape of the climate crisis.**”*

Inequality in Vulnerability and Accountability

It is widely known that the Global North is mostly responsible for the worsening climate conditions. According to a study published in the Lancet Planetary Health in 2020, the Global North is accountable for a staggering 92% of the excess global carbon emissions. The United States (US) is responsible for 40% of the climate breakdown and the European Union (EU), for 29%. In contrast, the Global South accounts for only 8% of the global CO₂ emissions. The remaining 23% is collectively generated by the rest of the world's countries.

A report published by the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) states that only 100 companies across the globe are responsible for 71% of GHG emissions that have led to global heating; over half of this figure can be traced to only a fourth of the total, or 25 companies and entities. Topping the list of the biggest CO₂-emitting firms are Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, ExxonMobil, National Iranian Oil Co., British Petroleum (BP), Royal Dutch Shell, Coal India, Pemex, and Petroleos de Venezuela. Interestingly, most of these companies are from the Global North. (Note: It was reported that 503 delegates with links to the fossil fuel-burning industries attended COP 26, who forcefully lobbied for the interests of the sector that they represent.)¹²

While the Global North continues to invest in these corporations and their dirty practices that drive the climate crisis, people from the Global South suffer disproportionately from the consequences of such practices. The Global South bears more than 90% of the costs of the climate crisis and an unconscionable 98% of the deaths associated with it.¹³ The crisis also has a devastating impact on these nations' economies. In fact, the development agency Christian Aid reported that the average gross domestic product (GDP) of the 65 most vulnerable countries will fall by 20% by 2050, and by 64% by 2100 should global temperature rise to 2.9°C.¹⁴



Just last December 2021, the Philippines, considered one of the most vulnerable countries to the climate crisis, was hit by super typhoon Rai (local name Odette). While tropical cyclones regularly enter the country, their ever-increasing occurrence and intensity are exacerbated by the climate crisis. The government recorded 407 people who died, 78 who went missing, and 1,147 who were injured due to the super typhoon. Damage to infrastructure and agriculture ballooned to over PHP24.5 billion.¹⁵ Rai reportedly affected more than 500,000 farmers and fisherfolks, with a volume of production loss placed at 273,062 MT and damage to an estimated 462,766 hectares of agricultural land.¹⁶

The devastation in the Philippines is not an isolated case. People from the Global South are suffering from the actions and/or lack of actions of the Global North in response to the climate crisis. Members of peasant communities from the South are suffering from hunger and malnutrition, dying, or getting injured from calamities, getting displaced and becoming homeless, and losing their livelihoods all because of the effects of the climate crisis.

Unfortunately, still many people (and institutions and governments) from the Global North deny the existence of the climate crisis and refuse to be held accountable for the problem they largely created. If and when they do acknowledge it, they propose or enact band-aid or greenwashing¹⁷ solutions to make it seem like they are implementing measures to combat the problem when these are just publicity stunts in order for them to appear environment friendly.

In COP 26, the concept of “net zero” was highlighted in a bid to tackle the challenge of limiting the impact of the climate crisis. Net zero means that the total GHG emission of an organization (city,

state, or country) should be equal to or less than the emission it removes from the environment. The UK government has made this the central aim of the conference and lobbied for other governments¹⁸ and corporations to subscribe to the idea. This greenwashing scheme pushed by the United Kingdom, together with the world's biggest polluters, will enable countries and businesses from the Global North to continue relying on fossil fuel as long as they clean up their carbon emissions.

Net zero is not the same as zero emission, which should be our primary goal in order to win the race against global rise in temperature. Net zero allows for the continued use of GHG-producing fuels while banking on technologies and large-scale planting of trees to offset these emissions. Aside from being counterproductive, this strategy is also extremely inequitable and unjust. Most countries from the Global South do not have enough resources to invest on technologies to clean up the carbon emission created by the Global North. Moreover, the tree planting scheme is premised on using lands mostly in the Global South for carbon sinks, and there is not enough land to accommodate all the government and corporate net zero plans.¹⁹ Moreover, the net zero targets made in COP 26 diminishes the sense of urgency for the need to limit global heating by perpetuating the notion of “burn now, pay later” approach.



Photo credit: Litia Maiava

Incorporating a human rights approach to loss and damage

While countries from the Global North seem to have the privilege to burn now and pay later, the Global South has been crying out for help and reparation.

“I have no choice but to keep on repeating it. What will it take for you to listen to us?”

Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, President of the Maldives in COP 26

The President of Maldives opened his national statement at the conference with the question above. He expressed that the islands of Maldives are progressively being submerged by the sea, and his country will cease to exist by the end of the century if the trend continues. Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley also claimed that global heating of 2°C will be the end for the people of Antigua and Barbuda, Maldives, Dominica and Fiji, Kenya and Mozambique, and Samoa and Barbados.²⁰

Another notable statement was from Tuvalu's Minister for Justice, Communication, and Foreign Affairs Simon Kofe who gave his speech while standing knee-deep in water to more graphically depict how Tuvaluans are living the reality of climate crisis and sea level rise.²¹

Throughout the Convention, climate crisis appeared to be a numbers game – how much money should a country pay or how many carbon points should one offset. Representatives especially from the Global South stressed how the climate crisis is not a hypothetical problem that will only happen by the year 2030, but is something that is already being experienced globally, year in and year out – with countries from the southern hemisphere bearing the brunt of the environmental destruction.

Leaders and activists demanded for industrialized countries – the biggest emitters – to take the lead and step up their efforts to keep global heating to within 1.5°C, mobilize climate finance in order to meet the US\$100 billion pledge, increase accountability measures for nations, and recognize liability and redress in the climate crisis.

One of the forms of liability and redress being demanded for is “loss and damage”. It is the principle of getting rich countries to compensate their poorer counterparts devastated by climate-related catastrophes such as storms, droughts, forest fires, floods, and the likes. The compensation can offer payment for a range of damage inflicted: infrastructure and land or water resources that were destroyed, lives that were lost, people that got injured, and species that were endangered or that possibly went extinct.

In the second week of COP 26, China, together with the developing countries under G77 and the small island nations, proposed for the creation of “Glasgow Loss and Damage Facility” that was supposed to operationalize the funding mechanism for the loss and damage initiative. However, this proposal was not included in the final text of the Glasgow Pact as developed countries, most importantly the US, Australia, and EU, staunchly opposed it.²²

The United States and the European Union have been fighting to keep the issue of loss and damage out of the COP since 2015, with US officials asserting that they refuse to accept the agreement containing stipulations for liability and compensation. This is not a surprise, since if and when loss and damage does get mandated, then both parties will be obligated to pay a colossal amount for reparations.²³ As previously cited, the US accounts for 40% of excess global carbon emissions, while EU comes in second at 29%.

There is currently no exact amount of how much is needed to compensate for all climate-related loss and damage. According to one environmental campaigner, vulnerable nations would need at least US\$300 billion to respond to loss and damage by 2030.²⁴ It was also proposed that countries should pay in proportion to the amount of pollution that they generated.

Activists' fight for loss and damage in COP 26, however, was not entirely futile. During the meeting, Scotland's first Prime Minister Nicola Sturgeon announced a major milestone for addressing the

matter; she offered two million pounds worth of funding, and challenged other world leaders to follow suit. Over the course of conference, philanthropic foundations also donated, including the Province of Wallonia in Belgium which offered one million euros. This is the first time ever that a country has made a concrete step in addressing the issue of loss and damage. Other countries are also hoping that rich countries do invest in the UN's Santiago Network (which connects vulnerable countries with resource providers); however, the unfortunate reality is that the network remains a mere symbol until it gets proper staffing and funding.^{25,26}

Is climate finance the ultimate solution to the worsening climate crisis?

From the discussions in COP 26, it is obvious that countries' (especially the developed ones) primary focus is on finance. Indeed, rich countries should put up funding for two purposes: 1) to fund developing and least developed countries' efforts to reduce CO2 emission; and 2) to pay for loss and damage from climate-related catastrophes. These two are key pillars that should be considered indispensable in the fight against climate crisis. By doing this, climate crisis would be considered both an environmental and a human rights concern, and not reduced as mere finance and carbon trade issues.

The discussion on loss and liability initially started in COP 21 in 2015, but progress has been exceedingly slow. This is due to the strong push back from industrialized countries to commit funding, concerned that it could lead to their bearing legal liability for the impacts of the climate crisis. While developed countries have pledged to commit US\$100 billion from 2020 to 2025, COP 26 showed that they have yet to fully fulfill this obligation. Even if the developed countries managed to fulfill the US\$100 billion pledge, climate finance is not enough. It only funds projects aimed towards reducing emissions (e.g., renewable energy, sustainable agriculture); there needs to be a separate fund to compensate for the perennial climate-related problems poor countries are experiencing.²⁷

Climate finance and carbon trading alone should not absolve the Global North from its many responsibilities and liabilities. These mechanisms should be complemented with efforts to mitigate the climate crisis by phasing out coal, shifting to renewable energy, prioritizing support for sustainable agriculture, defunding deforestation projects, and halting those that significantly produce CO2 and methane.

Furthermore, achieving net zero should not, in any way, be made an indicator that a country is reducing its carbon emission. In the middle of a climate emergency, nobody has the privilege to burn now and pay later. No matter how much money the Global North pays the Global South for mitigation measures and reparations, the climate crisis will continue to worsen unless they phase out their dirty practices. The fact remains that the Global North produces 92% of the excess global carbon emission; without an earnest effort by developed countries to substantially reduce their own emissions at the source, no amount of projects from the Global South would be enough to offset these emissions.



COP 26 may have looked like a success at face value, especially as it was held in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the reality is far from it. COP 26 has failed to meet its stated goals²⁸, especially in keeping the goal of capping global temperature at 1.5°C active and in phasing out coal. Instead, band aid and greenwashing solutions were adopted in the form of coal phasedown and net zero goals. It also failed to compel the rich countries to raise the USD100 billion per year from 2020 to 2025 for climate finance. No specific action steps forward were made in this regard except for the plan to realign financial targets again in 2022.

In summary, COP 26 fell short in almost all its promises – it approved watered down solutions to pressing matters and failed to provide concrete steps on how to operationalize plans to reach global targets. The planet is burning, and we only have a short period of time to save it. Pledges made in COP 26 must serve as building blocks in reaching our goals, to which we add more and ensure strict compliance and due accountability. **The existing efforts and targets are simply far from enough. However, we need to act NOW, while we still have the window of opportunity to reverse the damage done to this planet and make it more livable and humane. This fight is not just for us, but especially for the future generation. We have the tools and the means to do it, but we must have the political will and resolve to give up our “old, convenient, and destructive ways”. We need to adopt new practices that are sustainable, equitable, and just.**

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