

‘Standing with Your Feet in the Water’: COP26 Struggles to Succeed

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In the waning hours of this endlessly scrutinized and lambasted United Nations climate summit, with hundreds of members of civil society walking out of the conference in protest to join angry demonstrators in the streets, COP26 President Alok Sharma gathered leaders from every country for a stunning public gripe session/pep rally Friday.

History may record that the cavernous Cairn Gorm plenary hall, packed with international delegates and journalists, as the room where it happened. Or didn’t, depending on the precise wording of whatever draft of these Glasgow accords are finally signed.

“This is our collective moment in history,” Sharma declared as he opened the session. “This is our chance to forge a cleaner, healthier, more equitable world. We must rise to the occasion. Today has now come. And I need your pragmatic and workable solutions so we can all complete our work successfully. We have come a long way over the last two weeks. Now we need that final injection of can-do spirit that is present in this COP so that we get this shared endeavor over the line.”



COP26 President Alok Sharma at the plenary, Friday, Nov. 12. Image by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

Sharma recognized one national delegation leader after another, asking not for more platitudes, but rather for specific recommendations that would move negotiations toward a conclusion. He appeared unmoved by outside critics who declared this COP a failure before it started, or in the words of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, just more “[blah, blah, blah.](#)”

Frans Timmermans, the European Union leader at COP26, would later offer technical specifics. But that’s not what he was thinking about as he started to speak. He called up a photo of his grandson, Case, on his phone and shared it with the audience.

“An hour ago, my son Mark sent me a picture of my grandson, who is 1 year old,” Timmermans said. “I was thinking, Case will be 31 when we’re at 2050 [when most nations ideally will achieve their zero emissions goals]. And it’s quite a thought to understand that if we succeed, he will be living in a world that’s livable, and in an economy that is clean, air that is clean, at peace with his environment. If we fail — and I mean fail *now* — within the coming years, he will be fighting with other human beings for water and food. *That’s* the stark reality we face.

“So 1.5° [Celsius, the 2015 Paris Agreement target for limiting global temperature rise above pre-industrial times] is about avoiding a future for our children and grandchildren that is unlivable. I won’t reach 2050. But Case will be there, as a young man, and I want him to be able to live a peaceful, prosperous life, like I want it for everyone’s children and grandchildren in this room. This is *personal*. This isn’t about politics.”

Applause rippled through the plenary as Timmermans continued: “And I don’t live in Barbados or the Marshall Islands. But there it is far more personal because you are standing with your feet in the water. And this is what we need to address today. We need to make sure major emitters reduce their emissions so we can keep to 1.5; that needs to be at the

heart of decisions today.”



The E.U.'s Frans Timmermans gazes at an image of his grandson. Photo by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

A matter of life or death

Wilbur Ottichilio of Kenya reminded the plenary that “we did not inherit the earth from our forefathers. We have borrowed it until we turn it over to our children. But because of our greed, we have messed it up. We should be ashamed. 1.5° C is not just a statement in Africa. It is a matter of life or death.”

Sharma asked for specifics. Ottichilio offered them:

“Two million Kenyans face starvation as we sit here because of climate-induced drought. We are disappointed that the money promised by the largest nations — the 20 nations who produce 80% of emissions — has not yet been delivered for adaptation, [a Paris Agreement financial mechanism to help countries like Kenya adapt to climate impacts]. Our trust has been shattered by this [failure]. Those who have done the damage must take responsibility.”

Regarding developing world financial adaptation assistance, wealthy nations pledged at COP20 in Lima, Peru in 2014 to raise \$100 billion by 2020, with another \$100 billion every year after. Now, the fulfillment of that pledge for the first \$100 billion, still far short of the goal, has been pushed to 2023.

Canada's Steven Guilbeault offered a candid assessment about his own country's checkered history with climate action, and the reality of political will bending when the rules allow for it.

“As many of you would know, my country has not always been exemplary in these halls and negotiations,” he said. “But this has started changing a few years ago. Now in Canada we have one of the most ambitious carbon pricing systems in the world. But it’s not enough. We are investing record amounts of money in electric transportation. But it’s not enough.

“We have put in place new regulations to reduce methane emissions. But it’s not enough. We doubled our climate finance commitment. But it’s not enough. My country is the very incarnation of why we need strong language on all the pillars of the Paris Agreement.”

Guilbeault, too, was met with applause rolling across the plenary hall.



Anxious protestors on the streets of Glasgow. Image by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

Demands and warnings from vulnerable nations

To that end, Diann Black-Layne, representing Antigua and Barbuda, spoke directly to the political manipulation, sleight of hand, carbon emission accounting loophole creation, and outright cheating that some nations have been trying to write into the yet unfinished Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which deals with carbon markets, carbon pricing and carbon offsets.

“I tell you all now, do not carry over junk [carbon] credits; they will not benefit the world,” she warned. That’s a practice Australia has tried to carry out as it has claimed emission-reduction credits that are well over a decade old. “We will not leave Glasgow without our concerns being addressed and met,” said Black-Layne.

Bhutan’s Sonam Wangdi gave voice to the ever-present anger and resentment of being a small country with virtually no carbon footprint that is suffering a water crisis because of massive glacier snowmelt:

“Forty-six most vulnerable nations came here with high hopes. And now we have doubts in these final hours. Our actions are leading us in the wrong direction. If emissions are not drastically reduced this decade, it will be the poorest countries that are punished the most.”



Climate demonstrators parade through Glasgow. Image by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

How it could all fall apart

And then there are those countries who, as at every climate summit going back to COP1 and even Kyoto, quietly but persistently turn a deaf ear to human suffering, whether at home or around the world. Leaders from Russia and Saudi Arabia, almost speaking in code, made it clear that they are behind efforts to water down any COP26 language referring specifically to eliminating subsidies for fossil fuels.

Saudi Arabia’s Ayman Shusly, whom news reports identify with fossil fuel interests, obliquely pushed back against any effort to sharpen emission reduction language in the draft text, saying that toughened wording at Glasgow “would rewrite some aspects of the Paris Agreement at the expense of others.”

To show how bizarre and influential the sabotaging language of the so-called Carbon Club of oil producing nations has been in the past: The breakthrough 2015 Paris Agreement — though its primary objective is reducing emissions from burning fossil fuels — actually makes no specific mention of them anywhere in the document.

The first draft of the Glasgow accord, released Wednesday, is different. It “Calls upon parties to accelerate the phasing out of coal* and subsidies for fossil fuels.”

When a new draft was released Friday morning, the text was altered to call for “accelerating the phaseout of *unabated* coal* power and of *inefficient* subsidies for fossil fuels.” Both

qualifiers remove pressure from fossil fuel-rich countries like Saudi Arabia, Russia, Norway, and the United States, who have also refused to sign onto the '[Beyond Oil](#)' alliance which seeks to halt new oil and gas drilling.

Vulnerable nations could barely contain their disgust at the qualifying language and demanded the unambiguous forceful original.



Tina Stege, a COP26 summit negotiator from the Marshall Islands. Image by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

Wearing a wreath of live orchids, Tina Stege of the Marshall Islands, a country being swallowed by sea-level rise, said, “Fossil fuel subsidies are paying for our own destruction. We need clear language to eliminate all fossil fuel subsidies not only inefficient ones, and phase out coal, period.”

John Kerry, U.S. President Joe Biden’s climate envoy, appeared to want to have it both ways, perhaps looking to satisfy coal company baron and Democratic coal-state Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia — the decisive congressional vote on whether Biden’s expanded climate agenda gets funded.

Kerry stressed that the text on mitigation — referring to emission reductions — “cannot get weaker; it must get stronger. The science grows every single year.” But then he added: “The language of phasing out unabated coal and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies must stay. We’re not talking about burning coal as we always have, we’re talking about the capacity for carbon capture if you can do it.” Something [science](#) and [economics](#) shows the world [cannot yet do](#).

He added that as the world’s largest oil and gas producer, the U.S. still subsidizes the industry with billions every year. He said Biden has called for legislation to end those subsidies, a request that is very likely to be dead on arrival in the U.S. Congress.



John Kerry, representing the U.S., enters the COP26 plenary. Image by Justin Catanoso for Mongabay.

Kerry noted with exasperation that the G-20 nations cannot come up with \$100 billion to help countries devastated by climate change, but those countries, along with others, have managed to come up with \$2.5 *trillion* since the Paris Agreement was signed subsidizing oil, gas and coal production.

“That’s a definition for insanity,” he said. But neither he nor President Biden currently have the legislative influence to do much about that inequity.

Thinking perhaps of the voices raised outside on the streets of Glasgow, Kerry, who on balance has returned the U.S. to a leadership role in climate action after a four-year absence under Donald Trump, said:

“We believe that this climate crisis is existential. The impacts are being felt today. We need to live up to the expectations of young people who don’t want this to just be a place of words. It has to be in the next few hours a place of action. We can’t just say what it is, we have to *behave* like it is.”

The clock is ticking and the word wars continue into overtime at COP26.

UPDATE: After many hours of COP26 overtime, summit negotiators [pressured by China and India](#) conceded to the two nations’ demands to further weaken the first ever mention of coal in a COP agreement, changing the approved final text from “phasing out” to merely “phasing down” coal. The U.S. regretted the change, but [did nothing](#) to stop the watering down of the language in the [now completed accord](#). In a step forward, it was agreed that the world’s nations will be required to revise their national emissions pledges, known as NDCs, annually, rather than every five years as specified by the original Paris Agreement in 2015; it is hoped this will quicken the ratcheting down of national and global carbon emissions.

Various other agreements announced at the two-week Glasgow summit are considered steps forward, including one by the U.S. and China to [work together](#) to reduce carbon

emissions; another by 100 nations to [eliminate or reduce deforestation by 2030](#); and a third agreement by 105 countries to [cut methane emissions 30% by 2030](#).

Importantly, the national emissions pledges made at COP26 fell well short of what's needed to limit global temperature increases to 1.5° C (2.7° F), and to prevent climate catastrophe. Pacific island countries, who could [see their nations disappear this century](#), and protestors in the streets outside COP26 were stunned by the last minute maneuvering by China and India to weaken the Glasgow accord, with Greta Thunberg calling COP26 "[a failure](#)."

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Featured image: A billboard outside COP26 in Glasgow says it all: The climate future of the world and its children is being determined Now.

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