

COP26: An Outcome Somewhere Between Triumph and Train Wreck

Article by Pär Holmgren
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After much fanfare, COP26 came to an end last month. Some hailed it as an historic success, while others have branded it a total failure. But what does the outcome mean for climate action in Europe and beyond, and what are the dynamics that got us here? Green MEP Pär Holmgren sheds light on the diverging interpretations of the conference and assesses its mixed results.

Green European Journal: The COP26 conference ended last month in Glasgow. What is your verdict on the pact that emerged?

Pär Holmgren: You can always describe the COPs in positive or negative terms depending on your thoughts about the meeting beforehand. COPs function in a way that can't inspire high expectations. After all, in the United Nations context, every country has a veto on the final text. Countries such as Australia, Russia, and Saudi Arabia have stalled progress at COPs from the very beginning, as have China and India in different ways.

Going to Glasgow with very low expectations, I think that there were some positive developments. But the role of European Union and its members was a major disappointment. The EU and the United States should take much more responsibility for historical emissions. Much of the blame for the lack of progress has been put on India and China, and that is not right if you ask me. If India can only bring itself to commit to climate neutrality by 2070, it's not because they want to leave it that late. They are once again stressing that the major responsibility for most of the greenhouse gases that have been emitted since the 18th century lies with Europe and the US. They know it and they know that we know it.

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Climate finance was a major issue in Glasgow, and it relates directly to historic responsibility. The richer countries of the world failed to meet their promise of 100 billion US dollars per year to developing nations every year between 2020 and 2025, and COP26 did not see the issue properly resolved. What's your assessment of what was decided on climate finance?

To begin with, the 100 billion figure sounds like a huge amount of money but it's not that

much really. If you compare it to the amount spent on financial crises or the Covid-19 pandemic recovery, it's nothing. So, from that point of view, the EU, the US, and the other countries concerned should just accept their responsibility and pay up.

On the other hand, what will happen after 2025? Will the amount rise to 200 billion per year? Or 1000 billion per year? Of course, money is important in terms of climate justice, to fund adaptation and to compensate for loss and damage. However, the core issue is about transition and how to get there. With the falling cost of renewables, putting a price on the transition is difficult. So yes, rich countries should pay poorer countries for historical reasons. But money will not solve everything; the key is decreasing emissions as quickly as possible by focusing on mitigation.

The Glasgow pact ambiguously commits to phasing out “inefficient fossil fuel subsidies” and “phasing down coal”. The Paris Agreement did not actually mention fossil fuels. Is this a significant breakthrough?

Definitely. The language around “inefficient” or other details is not that important. In a few years, we will see a text at the COP without these specific words. The important point is that most countries agree that the fossil fuel era needs to end. This is one of the most important things that happened in Glasgow.

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How significant were the various side deals announced around the conference such as the methane pledge signed by 100 countries or the EU-US agreement on green steel?

From a purely green perspective – my background is as a climate scientist and meteorologist – none of this is sufficient. And we need to stress that point all the time. However, we've now come to a point where, finally, climate policies are genuinely comparable with what happened in the 1980s with the ozone layer and the Montreal Protocol.

Once the Montreal Protocol was ratified and signed, everything happened much faster because it sent such a strong signal to the markets and especially to the insurance industry. Investors will be increasingly reluctant to put money into fossil energy because they'll realise they won't make any money out of it 5, 10, or 15 years down the line. That's why the various side agreements are important. They will all link up and reinforce one another. Climate scientists and activists have been telling politicians to connect the dots to understand the problem for 30 years. Now we can start to see that happening.

You mention that the European Union showed insufficient leadership at the negotiations. Where and how should the EU make a greater contribution?

It is not that the EU did a bad job at the negotiations. Frans Timmermans [the European Commissioner responsible for the EU's climate plans] and the people around him did well considering that there are parties and countries in Europe that are quite firmly against the climate agenda. My criticism is rather about the steps not taken prior to the conference, such as the EU climate law or the nationally determined contributions of EU member states [the voluntary emission cuts that countries commit to at COPs].

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The analysis from Climate Action Tracker and other organisations that scrutinise climate policies is clear. If the whole world adopted climate plans with ambition as high (or low) as European countries, the climate would be on track for 3 degrees of warming by 2100. I've asked Frans Timmermans about this myself, and he answers citing the European Commission's own calculations. To me, that isn't leadership. The European Union should have much higher ambitions. If, due to the current situation in the European Parliament and the politics of many European countries, our policies are only ambitious enough for 3 degrees of warming, we should at least be honest about it and stop bragging that the EU's climate policy is in line with the Paris Agreement and climate science. Because it's not.

There has been much anger about how well fossil fuel interests were represented in Glasgow. What impact did this have on the negotiations?

If you had asked me about the fossil fuel industry 10 years ago, I would have said "Of course, they should be there so we can discuss. They are part of the problem but maybe they can be part of the solution as well." But let's face it, they've been at these negotiations for close to 30 years and it's obvious that they have one mission and that is to delay the transition. We don't have that time anymore. The climate is at 1.2 degrees of warming and we'll hit 1.5 roughly 10 years from now. With the current climate plans, the planet will be 2 degrees hotter in 30 years' time before, hopefully, it peaks in the second half of the century and begins to decrease. Close to 1.5 degrees by the end of the century is still possible but the global temperature will probably rise at least slightly above 2 degrees for a critical period in the middle of the century.

That there are still parts of the industry that try to delay action infuriates me. They don't deny the climate emergency; they understand it very well and have done since the beginning. But they are still trying to put economy above ecology and short-term profit over long-term sustainability. At the same time, dialogue with unions and workers in the fossil fuel industry remains essential. This transition – that needs to happen as fast as possible in this decade – means that there will be a huge amount of people all over the world that need new jobs and other forms of support.

Over the next 12 to 18 months, many key decisions will be made about Europe's climate plans. The proposals put forward as part of the European Commission's

Fit for 55 package include a phase-out of cars that run on petrol, extending carbon pricing to new areas of the economy, and a carbon tax on imports. How do you see the political battle ahead?

Overall, the EU's Fit for 55 package is a major chance to improve on Europe's climate ambition. For areas around energy, renovation, and transport, time and technology are on our side so there will not be much resistance. However, in others, the transition will take a long time and certain parts could be watered down and weakened. Look at the new Common Agricultural Policy voted through in November. It's a catastrophe.

What happens in different countries is really important. In Sweden, the centre-right and far-right parties recently put forward a budget proposing to lower the tax on petrol by five cents per litre. Regardless of the amount, the simple fact that there are political parties that are actually arguing that we should cut taxes on fossil fuels in a climate crisis shows the struggle ahead. This is the more ideological side of climate politics that we cannot forget about. People in the countryside and people struggling with rising energy prices should be at the top of our concerns. It's an important lesson for Greens to learn. Listen to the voters who feel like no one else is listening to them. Not everyone lives in a major city or can get around by bike.

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How can you bridge the real sense of urgency in the climate movement with the political need for Greens to bring people who have completely different priorities on board?

I've been active on climate issues for 25 years, first as a teacher at university then as a weather presenter on Swedish TV. I always tried to talk about climate change, to be an educator rather than just talking about the weather. I did this because we need to create a critical mass for change to happen. I honestly believe that the climate movement has become a critical mass. So the change will happen but, of course, it will face resistance. There will be the climate movement and green political parties on one side, a growing resistance on the other side, and the large group that has historically sat in the middle and that doesn't really care either way about the climate or biodiversity. The political battle hinges on whether we can get them to pick a side. Whether it takes years or decades, that is what we need to do.



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