

COP26: The Climate Ambition Summit 2020: a phoney “sprint to Glasgow”?

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Five years ago, the landmark 21st Conference of Parties (COP21) under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) produced the [Paris Agreement](#). The accord brought together 195 nations for the first time to agree to strengthen the global response to climate change by limiting global average temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limiting the increase to 1.5°C.

To mark its fifth-year anniversary the UN, United Kingdom, and France, in partnership with Chile and Italy, will co-host a virtual [Climate Ambition Summit](#) on 12 December 2020. The event will provide a stage for government, corporate and non-governmental leaders to demonstrate their continuing commitment to the Paris Agreement and the multilateral process, and more importantly, show the progress they have made on the targets they identified in Paris under the three areas of mitigation, adaptation, and support.

The Summit is being dubbed as “[sprint to Glasgow](#)” by the UN, where COP26 is scheduled to take place from 1-12 November 2021 after a one-year postponement due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It will feature announcements that demonstrate how governments are aligning their Covid-19 recovery packages and business plans with the 1.5°C and carbon neutrality goals. In particular, the UK and co-hosts have called for:

- New, more ambitious Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs);
- Long-term net-zero emissions strategies;
- Climate finance commitments to support the most vulnerable; and
- Ambitious adaptation plans and policies.

The UK’s new climate targets

Many years of intensive activism have led to climate change as an everyday concern now. Following a wave of protests launched by students and the Extinction Rebellion strikers, the UK parliament became the [first in the world to symbolically declare a climate emergency](#) in 2019. For the first time too, global warming was in the front and centre of the key debates in the [2019 UK elections](#),

although it is worth recalling that Boris Johnson did not take part in the first-ever televised debate on climate between contending party leaders.

As host of COP26, the UK government is keen to present to the world that the UK is going to be a leader in fighting climate change. On 4 December, Johnson announced “an ambitious” new emissions target, which is supposed to set the UK on the [path to net zero by 2050](#). The new plan aims for at least 68% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by the end of the decade, compared to 1990 levels. The announcement came ahead of the Climate Ambition Summit.

The new target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – the UK’s new NDC under the Paris Climate Agreement – is claimed to be among the highest in the world and commits the UK to cutting emissions at the fastest rate of any major economy so far. The UK’s path to meeting this target is backed by the Prime Minister’s [Ten Point Plan for a green industrial revolution](#), which he claims will create and support up to 250,000 British jobs by 2030.

Critics, however, are arguing that the plan [doesn’t go far enough](#) and that many elements of the plan will make things worse. First of all the [UK has failed on 14 out of 21 progress indicators](#) and is falling further behind in many areas according to the government’s Committee on Climate Change. Just two of 31 key policy milestones have been met over the past year. The current plans are based on the [2008 Climate Change Act](#).

Then there is that fixation on ‘net zero’. Many government and corporate plans interchange the terms ‘carbon neutral’, ‘climate neutral’, ‘net zero’, ‘zero emissions’ and ‘decarbonisation’. However, ‘net zero emissions’ does not mean ‘zero emissions’, and should not be accepted at face value. Governments need to fundamentally reduce the amount of GHG being produced. The problem is, all the targets since 2015 don’t show any sign of slowing down GHG emissions and net zero climate targets will just allow for continued rising levels of emissions, while hoping that technologies or tree plantations will be able to suck carbon dioxide (CO₂) out of the air in the future.

Given the UK’s history and legacy as a high-emitting country, it has a historical ecological debt, giving it a moral duty to decarbonise as much as feasibly possible domestically without offset to developing countries. The dangerous plan by corporations and governments of northern countries to continue to burn fossil fuels while relying on the forests and land in the global south to absorb their emissions is a neo-colonial practice that must stop for everyone’s sake.

A phoney “sprint to Glasgow”?

The provisional text of the report on State of the Global Climate 2020, released this week for discussion and review, shows that global temperatures continue to rise despite the lockdowns and temporary slowdown of manufacturing and aviation activities due to Covid-19. The year 2020 is on track to be one of the three warmest years on record. 2011-2020 will be the warmest decade on record, with the warmest six years all being since 2015.

The steady accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as a result of the burning of fossil fuels is the core of the climate problem and the most critical part when discussing ‘solutions’ to that problem. Distant targets of ‘net zero by 2050’ should not be seen as ambition, but rather inaction or harmful action continuing for decades.

Another key consideration is that most NDCs from northern countries (or Annex 1 in UNFCCC parlance) only talk about domestic targets. They don’t take into account the emissions from investment and financing of fossil fuels outside territorial borders. Now, even emerging economies like China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, are funding dangerous extractivist projects in the

member countries of the biggest economic partnership to date.

As long as governments, corporations and the global elites continue to avoid the hard tasks of rapidly stopping polluting, and bringing their annual emissions down to nearly zero, or Real Zero, within a decade, the Climate Ambition Summit is likely to remain nothing more than a phoney sprint to Glasgow.

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P.S.

- Global Justice Now. 10 December 2020:

<https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/blog/2020/dec/10/climate-ambition-summit-2020-phoney-sprint-glasgow>