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By Reynard Loki / Independent Media Institute
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IMI Submission: Reynard Loki: COP26: Climate Pledges Don't Match Up With Policies—or Consumer Behavior

The Glasgow Climate Pact kicks the climate can down the road.

After more than two weeks of negotiations during the United Nations COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, diplomats from almost 200 nations finally agreed on two major points: ramp up the fight against climate change and help at-risk countries prepare. Specifically, governments agreed to meet [again](#) next in 2022 with more robust plans to [slash carbon dioxide emissions by 45 percent by 2030](#), significantly reduce emissions of methane (which has even more global warming potential than CO₂), and nearly double the aid to poor countries to help them mitigate the effects of climate change. Notably, nations agreed to initiate reductions in coal-fired power and to begin slashing government subsidies on other fossil fuels, representing the first time a COP text mentioned coal and fossil fuels.

Alok Sharma, COP26's chief organizer, [called](#) the Glasgow Climate Pact “a fragile win.”

Acknowledging the deal is imperfect, U.S. climate envoy John Kerry registered his support. “You can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good, and this is good. This is a powerful statement,” he [said](#). “We in the United States are really excited by the fact that this raises ambition on a global basis.”

And while the agreement represents a step forward, it has been roundly criticized by scientists, climate activists and representatives from small, poorer nations who will feel

the brunt of the climate impacts much sooner than big, richer ones.

Shauna Aminath, environment minister of the Maldives, [denounced](#) the final COP26 deal as “not in line with the urgency and scale required.” The Maldives has supported life and human civilization for millennia, but 80 percent of the archipelago of low-lying islands in the Indian Ocean is [poised to be uninhabitable by 2050](#) due to rising sea levels caused by global warming. “What looks balanced and pragmatic to other parties will not help the Maldives adapt in time,” Aminath [said](#). “It will be too late for the Maldives.”

“COP26 has closed the gap, but it has not solved the problem,” [said](#) Niklas Hoehne, a climate policy expert from Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

Long before the annual climate chinwag, there was an air of futility about what has been described as our “[last and best chance](#)” at securing a livable environment for future generations. How could there not be? The leaders of [more](#) than 150 countries have been trying to lower humankind’s global warming emissions since the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) talks started more than a quarter-century ago. And since the first summit was held in 1995, [global emissions have, instead, skyrocketed](#).

The summit’s host, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson—who joined activists in invoking the mantra “[keep 1.5 alive](#)”—was unimpressed with his guests, [saying](#) during the G20 summit (held in Rome in the days leading up to COP26) that all the world leaders’ pledges without action were “starting to sound hollow” and criticizing their weak commitments as “drops in a rapidly warming ocean.”

Science has put a deadline on us. In order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels—a limit decided by the Paris agreement—humankind must achieve “net-zero” emissions (i.e., whatever amount we emit into the atmosphere, we must also remove) by 2050. But that target seems highly unlikely. Big polluting nations like the United States, China and Russia not only continue to burn fossil fuels at an alarming rate but also continue to drill for more oil. China—the world’s biggest emitter, responsible for [more than a quarter of humanity’s total emissions](#)—and Russia have [pushed](#) their own net-zero targets to 2060. India has [pushed](#) it to 2070. That is kicking the climate can down the field, to be dealt with by future leaders. (A quick glance at a [graphic created by the](#)

[Economist](#) showing the quick and steep drop in emissions that China must undergo to achieve its own target underscores the magnitude, and perhaps folly, of winning the war against the climate crisis.)

In the United States, a divided nation has ossified a gridlocked legislature that hasn't passed many game-changing climate laws. Much environmental protection has been exercised through executive actions, such as regulations imposed by federal agencies, which can be simply overturned by the next administration. When a Democrat is in the White House, [environmental protection is higher on the priority list](#). When a Republican is in the White House, it's [more about protecting polluters](#). The country lacks the necessary strong federal and state climate legislation to protect people and the environment from toxic, global-warming pollution, [protect fenceline communities](#) (which are often poor communities of color and Indigenous communities) and hold polluters to account.

One of the bright spots of the summit was a landmark \$19 billion [agreement](#) between more than 100 nations—together responsible for about 85 percent of the world's forests—to end deforestation by 2030. Healthy, intact forests are critical in the climate fight as they prevent around [one-third](#) of the world's carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion.

But in a press statement, Dan Zarin, the executive director of forests and climate change at Wildlife Conservation Society, [said](#) that the Glasgow Climate Pact “does not mean that the world has solved the climate crisis.” He pointed out that even if all the participating nations' pledges to reduce emissions (known as “nationally determined contributions” or “NDCs”) were achieved, the world would not hit the 45 percent reduction needed by 2030 to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius. In the Glasgow Climate Pact, countries only agreed to strengthen their NDCs by the end of 2022.

President Joe Biden, who attended the summit, hailed the forest agreement, which aims to restore almost 500 million acres of ecosystems, including forests, by 2030. “We're going to work to ensure markets recognize the true economic value of natural carbon sinks and motivate governments, landowners and stakeholders to prioritize conservation,” [said](#) Biden, adding that the plan will “help the world deliver on our shared goal of halting natural forest loss.”

But activists were less enthused. The forest agreement “is one of those oft repeated attempts to make us believe that deforestation can be stopped and forest can be conserved by pushing billions of dollars into the land and territories of the Indigenous Peoples,” [said](#) Souparna Lahiri of the Global Forest Coalition, an international coalition of NGOs and Indigenous Peoples’ organizations defending the rights of forest peoples.

“[R]eferences to the rights of Indigenous peoples are relatively weak” in the Glasgow text, [said](#) Jennifer Tauli Corpuz, a lawyer from the Igorot people in the Philippines and chief policy lead at Nia Tero, a nonprofit advocacy group for Indigenous peoples. Specifically, she said that “[w]e will have to watch closely the implementation of [COP26’s] new carbon scheme,” referring to the finalization of rules that will manage the creation of the international carbon market, and were part of the 2015 Paris climate accord.

In addition to the lack of Indigenous representation in the final text of the Glasgow Climate Pact, people from poorer island nations that are most susceptible to the impacts of sea level rise were also underrepresented at the talks, mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions. Just [three out of 14 climate-vulnerable Pacific island states](#) were able to send delegates to COP26, while the [fossil fuel industry sent more than 500](#) delegates.

Ultimately, the climate pledges made by nations [do not match the climate policies](#) of those nations. And since the pledges are non-binding, there is no legal stimulus to ensure that actual policies line up with those pledges. “The NDCs are voluntary measures,” [said](#) Lakshman Guruswamy, an expert in international environmental law at the University of Colorado-Boulder. “There’s no way of implementing, imposing, or trying to enforce a non-binding agreement.”

No penalties, no legal ramifications, no climate court, no climate police. All people have is civil society. It’s up to us “regular people” to stand up, speak up and mobilize; to inspire care for the climate and the environment in young people; and to rethink and retool our own personal behaviors to be in line with the ultimate goals we have for the future. There can be no significant change without both the political will behind candidates who will fight against climate change and public pressure to hold elected officials to their word. What many engaged citizens in the U.S. don’t realize is that it’s not enough to participate only once every four years by voting in presidential elections. Real change happens when

people take an active role in their local communities. It starts at home, with our families, our friends and our neighbors.

Make no mistake: Our personal decisions as consumers play a decisive role in the state of the global climate. “While large oil companies like ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, and Chevron are the biggest emitters of greenhouse gas emissions, we consumers are complicit,” [writes](#) Renee Cho, a staff writer for the Columbia Climate School. “We demand the products and energy made from the fossil fuels they provide. One scientist found that [90 percent](#) of fossil fuel companies’ emissions are a result of the products made from fossil fuels.”

Sadly, according to a recent poll, even though a majority of people believe that climate change is a serious issue, few are actually willing to change their lifestyles to help save the environment. “Citizens are undeniably concerned by the state of the planet, but these findings raise doubts regarding their level of commitment to preserving it,” [according to the survey](#) of 10 countries, which included the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany. “Rather than translating into a greater willingness to change their habits, citizens’ concerns are particularly focused on their negative assessment of governments’ efforts... The widespread awareness of the importance of the climate crisis illustrated in this study has yet to be coupled with a proportionate willingness to act.”

Even if consumers become more willing to adapt their behaviors to make them more climate-friendly, they are not necessarily knowledgeable as to how to make those changes. “[I]ndividual consumers are not capable of identifying the behavior changes that are really worth doing to help the climate,” [writes](#) John Thøgersen, an economic psychologist at Aarhus University, in the journal Behavioral Sciences.

Emmanuel Rivière, director of international polling at Kantar Public, which ran the 10-country survey to coincide with COP26, [said](#) the poll results contained “a double lesson for governments.”

First, they must “measure up to people’s expectations... [b]ut they also have to persuade people not of the reality of the climate crisis—that’s done—but of what the solutions are, and of how we can fairly share responsibility for them.”

This article was produced by [Earth | Food | Life](#), a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Reynard Loki is a writing fellow at the [Independent Media Institute](#), where he serves as the editor and chief correspondent for [Earth | Food | Life](#). He previously served as the

environment, food and animal rights editor at AlterNet and as a reporter for Justmeans/3BL Media covering sustainability and corporate social responsibility. He was named one of FilterBuy's Top 50 Health & Environmental Journalists to Follow in 2016. His work has been published by Yes! Magazine, Salon, Truthout, BillMoyers.com, CounterPunch, EcoWatch and Truthdig, among others.

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