

COP26: KEY TAKEAWAYS

By
Mian Ahmad Naeem Salik
Research Fellow

&
Mir Sher Baz Khetran
Research Fellow

Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), ISSI

Edited by
Dr Neelum Nigar

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The 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, more commonly referred to as COP26, was the 26th United Nations Climate Change conference, held at the SEC Centre in Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom (UK), from October 31 to November 13, 2021. The president of the conference was UK cabinet minister Alok Sharma. Before the beginning of COP26, around 154 parties had submitted their updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). These NDCs represented almost 80 % of the global emissions covering almost 90 % of the world's net-zero targets.¹

Key Takeaways:

- COP26 is the first-ever conference to agree on phasing down coal, responsible for about 40% of annual CO₂ emissions. It agreed to cut methane emissions by 30%. Methane has more than 80 times the warming power of carbon dioxide and is responsible for about a third of the global temperature increase.
- While other leaders vowed to end deforestation and reduce global methane emissions by the end of the decade, India the world's third-worst carbon emitter did not sign on to either plan

¹ Gareth Redmond-King, "UK to host 2021 UN climate summit, COP26," The Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit, <https://eciu.net/analysis/briefings/international-perspectives/cop-26>

- Another critical undertaking is to halt and reverse deforestation by 2030. Also, surprisingly, the United States and China, despite their competition elsewhere, agreed to take steps for a range of climate issues, including the transition to clean energy and decarbonisation.
- UN climate talks in Scotland ended with a global agreement that aimed at least to keep alive hopes of capping global warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, and so maintain a realistic chance of saving the world from catastrophic climate change.

Pakistan's Position at COP26:

Special Assistant to the PM on Climate Change, Malik Amin Aslam was heading the ten-person Pakistani delegation to the COP, along with the Minister of State for Climate Change Ms. Zartaj Gul. Mr Aslam apprised the participants of COP26 during his speech, that Pakistan's focus is to invest in institutional strengthening and capacity building, modernization of the observation infrastructure; data management, and forecasting systems. He also said Pakistan is applying nature-based solutions to bolster climate change adaptation and mitigation objectives while addressing issues like livelihoods and reducing damages from natural disasters. Referring to the coronavirus pandemic he said Pakistan ably utilized the situation to ensure economic sustenance of people and converting the challenge into an opportunity through now is the world-acclaimed Green Stimulus initiative, which has been approved by PM Khan as part of the efforts for ensuring economic security after the emergence of the pandemic.²

Mr Aslam further shared the details of an ambitious project with the participants of COP26 that aims at transforming the Indus basin with climate resilient agriculture and water management. He said this project has an estimated lifespan of 20 years and it would transform agriculture in the Indus Basin by increasing resilience among the most vulnerable farmers and strengthening government capacity to support communities at all levels. He noted that with less than 1% of the global emissions, Pakistan is not a part of the problem of climate change. However, it has chosen to be a part of the solution. Pakistan's NDC shows what is possible if a clear climate vision and strategic planning get positively aligned.³

² "Pakistan making investment worth millions of dollars in ecosystem restoration," The News, November 11, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/907782-pakistan-making-investment-worth-millions-of-dollars-in-ecosystem-restoration>

³ "Pakistan shares details of Indus Basin project at COP26," The News, November 6, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/906468-pakistan-shares-details-of-indus-basin-project-at-cop26>

Mr Aslam also met US President Joe Biden when Pakistan officially joined more than 80 nations who signed up for the US led global methane pledge agreeing to cut methane emissions by 30% by the end of this decade to tackle climate change. Cutting methane, a potent but relatively short-lived gas which comes from sources like fuel extraction and livestock farming, is seen as an effective short-term contribution to climate action. President Biden thanked PM Imran Khan for committing to the pledge. Pakistan, as one of the world's top 30 methane emitters, has now committed to tackling methane from livestock and flare gas capture.⁴

Pakistan also unveiled its innovative Ecosystem Restoration Initiative (ESRI), initiated with a USD 180 million support from the World Bank, at the COP26. Pakistan's initiative was launched at the COP25 held in Madrid in 2019, and it is now operational with interventions like honey production and marketing, green jobs, mangrove restoration, expansion of protected areas, and transition to electric vehicles. Under the project, 15,000 beekeepers will be trained, and the honey industry will be established producing abundant export quality honey. The aim is to create over 6,000 eco-tourism jobs for local communities and restore 55,000 acres of mangroves forest along with promoting a shift towards electric public transport in all major cities of Pakistan. World Bank official lauded measures operational in the areas of climate change and employment in the country.⁵

On the side-lines of COP26 Pakistan and the UAE signed a MOU for forging Green Cooperation and a new Climate Partnership to promote Clean Energy and Nature-Based Solutions. The Asian Development Bank also allocated USD 300,000 of grant funds to Pakistan to undertake pre-feasibility study for early retirement of coal and fossil fuel plants under the Energy Transition Mechanism. The UK also pledged over £ 55million to partner with Pakistan in fighting climate change and ensure it becomes more resilient to climate impacts, with more sustainable water use and greater access to climate finance, so improving lives and livelihoods.⁶

4 Rina Saeed Khan, "Pakistan signs US led Global Methane Pledge at COP26," Express Tribune, November 3, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2327529/pakistan-signs-us-led-global-methane-pledge-at-cop26>

5 Rina Saeed Khan, "Pakistan unveils ESR climate initiative at COP26 summit," Express Tribune, November 4, 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2327669/pakistan-unveils-esr-climate-initiative-at-cop26-summit>

6 "COP 26: UK pledges over £55m to partner with Pakistan in fighting climate change," Geo.Tv, November 4, 2021, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/380278-cop-26-uk-pledges-over-55m-to-partner-with-pakistan-to-fight-climate-change-manage-water-more-sustainably-and-unlock-climate-investment>

Conclusion

Even though COP26 failed in meeting its stated targets, it will be incorrect to call it a failure. It has left a complex web of opportunities and challenges for everyone. Countries needed to commit drastic measures to lower greenhouse gas emissions and rich nations to meet the repeatedly missed target of USD 100 billion in climate finance considered by many as grossly inadequate to support the developing world's efforts and compensate for damage already caused. However, despite the world hurtling towards a catastrophic future, some countries dragged their feet on what should have been non-negotiable. Ultimately, Pakistan's fate and that of the world depends on whether the deal hammered out at COP26 is so diluted as to be fatally compromised. Climate finance is central to all of it because every transition requires finance. If finance cannot be directed towards this pathway, it just shows the big 20 polluters are not serious.⁷

Over the last two decades, due to extreme weather events, Pakistan is estimated to have suffered economic loss ranging from USD 1.3 billion (UNISDR) to USD 3.8 billion (Germanwatch) annually. If the temperature rises by 2.7 degree Celsius, the implications for Pakistan would be dire. It is already a water-stressed country and will see severe droughts. There will be increased coastal erosion and seawater incursions. Pakistan's major crops, such as cotton, wheat, sugarcane, maize, and rice may have up to 25% lower yields. Temperature rise will result in rapid glacial melting, and there may be more frequent floods with consequential human and economic losses.⁸

The updated NDCs of Pakistan proved exceptional in depicting the country's high priority mitigation initiatives, such as becoming 60 % zero-carbon in energy generation, and 30% electric in transportation. The ongoing Ten Billion Tree Tsunami is said to have sequestered 148.76 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO_{2e}) by 2030. Clean Green Pakistan and the Billion Tree Tsunami projects started by the governments of Pakistan as a response to the challenge of global warming are good initiatives and reversing forest loss. There is a need to motivate society to cope with pollution and climate change issues and challenges. This billion-tree campaign includes restoration of forests and mangroves and planting trees in rural and urban areas, but proper monitoring and evaluation are necessary to make this project successful and exemplary.⁹

⁷ Editorial, "Diluted deal," Dawn, November 15, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1658190/diluted-deal>

⁸ Khaleeq Kiani, "Climate change to cost Pakistan \$3.8bn yearly," Dawn, May 19, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1624382>

⁹ Ali Tauqeer Sheikh, "Five takeaways from COP26," Dawn, November 21, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1659322>

The fundamental difficulty for Pakistan is not that the developed countries have not augmented their commitments which certainly need to increase during this decisive decade to support developing countries. Pakistan's most urgent challenge is two-fold: the inability to have direct access to concessional climate finance on the one hand, and, on the other hand, its inability to spend and absorb the finances that are secured in its name by others.[12] Pakistan's water flows from glaciers to rivers and glaciers are melting rapidly because of global warming causing flooding and water scarcity is expected to increase dangerously and adversely. Coordinated efforts and effective planning are needed to curb issues and challenges such as environmental protection and global warming regarding the availability and storage of abundant water and food sources for the nation and future generations.¹⁰

¹⁰ Dr Shahid Raza, "UN-Climate Change Conference and Pakistan," Daily Times, November 19, 2021, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/843548/un-climate-change-conference-and-pakistan/>