

## COP26: World agrees to phase out fossil fuel subsidies and reduce coal

By Adam Vaughan in NEW SCIENTIST

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Nearly 200 countries have made an unprecedented and historic pledge at the COP26 climate summit to speed up the end of fossil fuel subsidies and reduce the use of coal, after India pushed through an 11th hour intervention to weaken the language on coal.

Crucially, despite almost a fortnight's negotiations that ran more than 24 hours late, the 196 countries meeting in Glasgow, UK, committed to issuing stronger 2030 climate plans next year in a bid to avert dangerous global warming.

Pledges at COP26 are expected to see Earth warm 2.4°C this century, better than the predicted 2.7°C predicted before the summit but still a rise that would bring extreme climate impacts and see countries overshoot their shared goals of 1.5°C and "well below" 2°C.

The promise to "revisit and strengthen" new plans by the end of 2022 means the UK government hosting the summit can credibly claim to have delivered its aim of "keeping alive" the 1.5°C target. "It is a big moment," says Chris Stark from the Climate Change Committee, an independent group that advises the UK government.

Fresh plans submitted next year for curbing emissions in 2030 must be aligned with the 1.5°C goal, an important new requirement that means those governments that fall short will have to justify why to their citizens. Australia, Brazil and Indonesia are among many countries whose existing plans are inadequate and will need to be strengthened.

Until today, coal and fossil fuel subsidies have never been explicitly mentioned in 26 years of treaties and decisions at UN climate talks, despite coal being one of the key drivers of global warming and \$5.9 trillion of subsidies being given annually to coal, oil and gas.

The language in COP26's final decision text, now known as **the Glasgow Climate Pact**, sees countries agree to "accelerating efforts" on the phase-out of "inefficient" subsidies. In a dramatic last-minute intervention, minutes before the outcome was adopted, India proposed a watered-down version of the language on coal, changing to "phasing down" of coal rather than "phasing out."

Despite several countries expressing anger at the last-ditch move, the weaker text was officially adopted. COP26 president Alok Sharma said he was "deeply sorry" for the way the final minutes unfolded, and was visibly emotional. The decision covers "unabated" coal, meaning coal could still be used when combined with carbon capture and storage.

The commitments made in Glasgow will disappoint many climate campaigners for falling short of putting the world on course to almost halve emissions by 2030, the path needed to limit warming to 1.5°C.

Experts said it was nonetheless a good outcome for one summit and a case of expectations being too high. "It's not enough. But this is a process. I would have loved Glasgow to have fixed the problem, but it won't and it was never going to," says Stark. A path to a 1.5°C future is now "hanging by a thread" but "is still there, which is amazing", he adds.

Michael Jacobs at the University of Sheffield, UK, who was previously an adviser to former UK prime minister Gordon Brown, says the most countries could achieve at COP26 was to admit their 2030 plans weren't good enough and agree to return next year with better ones aligned to a 1.5°C trajectory. "They've done that," he says.

Money cast a big shadow over the summit, after it emerged that high-income countries wouldn't deliver their promise of \$100 billion of finance a year to lower-income countries until 2023, three years late. Countries expressed their "deep regret" that only about \$80 billion was delivered in 2019, a quarter of which was for adapting to climate change. They also agreed to hash out a new plan in the next three years for what a future climate finance goal looks like beyond 2025.

Adaptation was a key issue that rose up the agenda at Glasgow, after being largely overshadowed by emissions cuts at past UN climate summits. This time, high-income countries agreed that by 2025 they must double adaptation finance to about \$40 billion a year. And nations agreed to work out a new global adaptation goal in future talks.

The conference stopped short of accepting a proposal by a group of 77 developing countries and China, which called for a new fund for the highly charged issue of "loss and damage". That would have been the first step to some form of financial compensation from higher-income to lower-income countries for extreme weather and other climate impacts such as rising sea levels. However, nations promised to continue talking about funding for "loss and damage associated with the adverse impacts of climate change".

Countries also reached agreement on technical but important rules on the Paris Agreement that have proved intractable in the six years since the world's first comprehensive global climate treaty was agreed. Chief among those are the rules governing a new global carbon market under "Article 6" of the Paris accord, paving the way for a successor to a past scheme called the UN Clean Development Mechanism.

Other outstanding items in the "Paris rulebook" were ironed out, including "common timeframes" for when countries issue new carbon targets. That will be every five years for a new target 10 years later, so 2025 for 2035, and so on. Transparency rules over reporting of emissions cuts were resolved too.

The final decisions were gavelled through by COP26 president Alok Sharma this evening after almost a fortnight of talks in Glasgow. That official approval followed 3 hours of many countries' delegates listing their mixed feelings about the final deal: "it's not perfect... but it does represent real progress", said Tina Stege, climate envoy for the Marshall Islands. Negotiators had worked overnight for several days in a row.

Earlier in the summit, countries struck a series of voluntary side deals on halting deforestation, stopping international financing for coal, blocking new oil and gas projects and curbing methane, a short-lived but powerful greenhouse gas.

The conference was attended at the outset by 120 world leaders, including US president Joe Biden and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, who announced that India would hit net-zero emissions by 2070. Several other countries, including Australia and Saudi Arabia, also declared long-term net-zero goals on the eve of COP26, meaning about 90 per cent of world emissions are now covered by a net-zero target. “The shift in the long-term outlook has been utterly dramatic,” says Stark.

Countries agreed that next year’s UN climate summit will be held in Egypt.