News
News
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COP26, the United Nations climate change summit, held in Glasgow, Scotland, concluded Nov. 13, a day past the scheduled timeframe. Delegates representing nearly 200 countries agreed to the Glasgow Climate Pact that for the first time stated the need to move away from fossil fuels. (EarthBeat photo/Brian Roewe)



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The United Nations climate summit known as COP26 took some steps forward in the global effort to rapidly limit dangerous levels of warming, but not nearly enough or fast enough, say Catholic groups who were present in Glasgow throughout the two-week conference.

COP26 came to a close late on Nov. 13, a day after its scheduled end. Its final document, the Glasgow Climate Pact, showed signs of progress, with countries asked to deliver new plans to cut greenhouse emissions by next year, movement on "loss and damage" and the first-ever mention — in 26 years of these proceedings — of the need to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

But for many, the ambition exhibited by nations, near the start of a decade scientists say is critical to avoid catastrophic climate change, was less than expected and overall disheartening.

"This COP has yet again failed to deliver real ambitious action and transformation," Josianne Gauthier, secretary general of CIDSE, a network of Catholic development agencies, said in a statement. "This is a missed opportunity to change course and reach an inclusive economic system that supports healthy and thriving ecosystems and protects human rights and dignity for all."

The summit in Glasgow had been billed as the most important U.N. meeting on climate since COP21, where in 2015 nearly 200 countries adopted the Paris Agreement. The U.N. conference was seen as a vital checkpoint for nations to demonstrate progress in achieving the key goal set out six years earlier: holding average temperature rise to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius to avert the most catastrophic consequences of global warming.



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Alok Sharma, the British politician acting as COP26 president, stated at its conclusion, "We can now say with credibility that we have kept 1.5 degrees alive. But, its pulse is weak and it will only survive if we keep our promises and translate commitments into rapid action."

Along with the final text, countries made commitments to slash methane, end deforestation, mobilize private investments toward net-zero targets and billions of dollars in new pledges. The United States, participating for the first time since rejoining the Paris Agreement, worked to reestablish a leadership role in the international climate arena, and a late agreement reached with China to take joint "enhanced climate actions" and raise ambition this decade, though short on details, was welcomed by many.

"COP26 has not been a disaster — but not a success either. Some would call it a 'compromise' [or] a 'balanced outcome,' " Lorna Gold, board chair of the Laudato Si' Movement, told EarthBeat. "Sadly, a rapidly changing climate does not react to such human excuses. Climate reacts only to action — scientifically verifiable reductions. We are still a long way off from that."

Added Rodne Galicha, executive director of Living Laudato Si' Philippines, "The longer we delay meaningful climate action and the more time and resources we invest in false solutions, the more suffering vulnerable communities would continue to have from climate change impacts."



The town of Pimienta, Honduras, was flooded during Hurricane Iota in November 2020. While a lot of people were prepared, the flash flooding caught many by surprise and they lost all their belongings. (Photo courtesy of Sean Hawkey, World Council of Churches)

Pope calls for 'courage'

Throughout the two weeks, Catholic and other faith-based organizations, along with countless more from the frontlines of climate change, pressed government diplomats to deliver results that help rather than harm the communities most vulnerable to climate change.

While officials from the United Kingdom, which hosted the conference, sought for COP26 to be inclusive, youth and Indigenous groups railed against the lack of access, not just for those who made it to Scotland but for the many more who could not travel because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Interventions came from the highest levels of the church, with Pope Francis sending a message at the start and issuing others during the proceedings. An unprecedented joint appeal from the pope and nearly 40 other world religious leaders hung in frames outside the major plenary halls. And people of faith were present everywhere, from the halls and negotiating sessions to marches of more than 100,000 people through Glasgow's streets, braving Scottish rains and gales to demand more urgent action.



Catholics take part in a march of more than 100,000 people Nov. 6 through the streets of Glasgow, Scotland, calling for stronger and more urgent action to address climate change from world leaders. (Laudato Si' Movement)

After the Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square Nov. 14, a day after COP26 ended, Francis said that the "cry of the poor, combined with the cry of the Earth, resounded" during the Glasgow summit.

"I encourage those who have political and economic responsibilities to act immediately with courage and foresight," Francis said. "At the same time, I invite all people of good will to exercise active citizenship for the care of the common home," the pope added, as he announced that registration had opened for the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform.

In a statement issued ahead of COP26's conclusion, the Holy See delegation said that while some commitments made by nations "are promising," gaps remained in the key areas of mitigation, adaptation and financing.

"The resources made available for these three aspects, which are fundamental for achieving the objectives of the Paris Agreement, will need to be strengthened and renewed in order to achieve these goals," the statement read.



People hold candles as they take part in a vigil outside the U.N. Climate Change Conference Nov. 10 in Glasgow, Scotland. (CNS/Reuters/Russell Cheyne)

Partial progress on faith priorities

The two-week COP26, originally scheduled for December 2020, was delayed a year by the pandemic. But while the summit was put on hold, global warming did not stop, with 2020 tied with 2016 as the warmest year on record, and greenhouse gases in the atmosphere reaching record levels despite pandemic lockdowns.

Scientists have called the 2020s a critical decade for dramatically slashing emissions, which must be cut by at least 45% to have a chance at meeting the 1.5 C target. A major report from the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in August showed that the planet could cross the 1.5 C threshold sometime in the 2030s.

Catholic organizations came to Glasgow with several priorities in hand. Along with holding countries to the 1.5 C target, they sought for COP26 to deliver long-promised

funding of $100 billion annually from developed nations to developing countries to adapt to climate change and reduce their own emissions. They also pressed for a new fund to cover losses and damages already caused by climate change, and for the conference to consign the use of fossil fuels to history.

On each of these fronts, COP26 saw some progress, but not enough to satisfy many of the Catholic and other civil society organizations present and following from afar.



Members of various Catholic organizations meet inside the Action Zone at the COP26 United Nations climate change conference Nov. 2 in Glasgow, Scotland. (EarthBeat photo/Brian Roewe)

"Climate change is our fierce urgency of now and the Glasgow Climate Pact does not rise to the moment," said Chloe Noel, faith economy ecology project coordinator of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, referring to a phrase used by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

National pledges brought to Glasgow or updated there place the world on track to warm by 2.4 C by the end of the century, according to Climate Action Tracker. Further complicating the climate math, a major investigation by The Washington Post found that most countries are underreporting their emissions, with a "giant gap" between what they report to the U.N. and the amount they actually release into the atmosphere.

The Paris accord requires countries to submit new pledges, called nationally determined contributions, every five years. That placed added importance on COP26, since the next updates wouldn't come until the mid-2020s. Recognizing the lack of progress, the Glasgow Climate Pact calls for countries to submit new emissions reduction plans by the end of next year.

While some saw that ramped-up timeline as a victory, it comes as "a major disappointment" for communities already suffering from increased drought, heatwaves and flooding, said Neil Thorns, director of advocacy for CAFOD, the overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

"For some this will be too late, which is simply not acceptable," he said.

Adding in other commitments made at the summit — among them, cutting methane emissions by 30% and ending deforestation, both by 2030 — could lower the warming trajectory to 1.8 C, according to several studies issued during the conference, though with the caveats that all pledges must be implemented fully and on time.

A past promise from developed nations to provide $100 billion annually to developing countries by 2020 remains unmet, despite early optimism that it would be reached in Glasgow. It is now expected by 2023. The final text acknowledges failure on this front and urges countries to double financing for adaptation by 2025. On loss and damage, the final document directs countries to provide additional support, but does not establish a financing mechanism.



Africans join a protest during a Day of Action at the U.N. Climate Change Conference Nov. 6 in Glasgow, Scotland. (CNS/Simon Caldwell)

Some advances, but plans fall short

In response to drafts of the final text, Cardinal Soane Patita Paini Mafi, bishop of the Pacific island Diocese of Tonga and Niue and president of Caritas Oceania, bemoaned the lack of concrete financing for loss and damage and the "overdue" $100 billion pledge.

The cardinal said that Oceania is already experiencing droughts, sea level rise and salinization of water, and called on world leaders to deliver a document with specific actions "that places those living on the frontline of the climate crisis at its heart."

The final document did break new ground on fossil fuels. For the first time in the history of climate negotiations, it directly states the need to reduce the use of fossil fuels, though not as forcefully as activists and some delegations had hoped or as strongly as it was stated in the earliest drafts.

In a key shift, the wording was changed from "phase out" to "phase-down" of "unabated coal power" and "inefficient fossil fuel subsidies" — a revision backed by China and India, which rely significantly on coal for energy.

A last-minute petition from more than 40 Catholic organizations pressed delegates to include in the final agreement "a clear and ambitious timeline" for a just transition away from fossil fuels. While the "phase-down" language survived the final document, it did not specify a timeframe for that to happen.

Lindlyn Moma, advocacy director for the Laudato Si' Movement, said the language change was "incredibly disappointing … in what could have been a historic agreement on the end of coal." As it stands, she said, the text "does not even come close to Pope Francis' recommendation that coal should be replaced without delay."



Members of the Laudato Si' Movement present a copy of the Healthy Planet, Healthy People petition, which drew more than 120,000 signatures from Catholics, during an event at St. George's Tron Church Nov. 2 in central Glasgow, Scotland. Pictured, from left, are Jonathon Braden, Lorna Gold, Lindlyn Moma and Jane Mellett. (EarthBeat photo/Brian Roewe)

Delegates also completed the rulebook for implementing the Paris Agreement, which sets out guidelines for how carbon markets and controversial offset programs will operate.

Elsewhere, COP26 made strides in moving the world's socioeconomic structures away from the burning of fossil fuels, which is the primary driver of global warming. More than 20 countries, including the U.S., committed to end financing of overseas fossil fuel projects, although that pledge was weakened by the failure of major emitters like the U.S. and China to agree to end their own domestic use of coal.

Nearly 50 nations, including Poland, Chile and South Korea, agreed to wind down use of coal-fired power, and a dozen countries formed a coalition called the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance.

Despite those advances, however, Catholic development officials said that national plans still fall well short of the 1.5 C target, belying any declarations of the summit as a success.

"The COP26 talks have come up short," Thorns said. "We are on a road with no turning back now. The question is are we travelling 'far enough, fast enough and fairly enough' — to which the answer is no."



A wind-driven wildfire burns near a power line tower Oct. 10, 2019, in Sylmar, California. (CNS/Reuters/Gene Blevins)

Holding out for hope

Despite shortcomings at the climate summit, Catholics and others say it's the role of people of faith not to lose hope in the face of climate change.

Writing at Global Sisters Report, Beth Blissman, the U.N. representative for the Loretto Community, sought to counter narratives of despair from Glasgow and highlighted some of the positives that emerged there. Going forward, she said, the challenge will be "to maintain hope and embrace stubborn optimism."

Striking a similar chord, Carmody Grey, an assistant professor of Catholic theology at Durham University in England, said during a "Catholics at COP26" webinar Nov. 10 that it has become clear "that narratives of hopelessness don't inspire action," and that the church can draw on its own history of times when situations looked dark. In the present, she said, people of faith must stand up and say that failure on climate

change is not an option.

"Every single Christian community needs to say, 'We will not accept this.' And I would like to hear the Catholic Church be absolutely front and center," she said.

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A number of climate activists have already turned their attention to COP27, scheduled for November 2022 in Egypt. That the summit will take place in Africa has raised some hopes that the priorities of countries that stand to suffer most from climate change, while contributing the least, will gain more traction.

"For us in Zambia, climate change is a reality, it is happening," said Musamba Mubanga, a climate change specialist for Caritas Zambia. "People have lost their farmlands and livelihoods to drought and floods, yet we have contributed the least to this crisis. It is crucial to keep 1.5 C alive."

Noel of Maryknoll said it was essential that nations ensure that Africa has wide and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and testing in the coming year. "It would be a shame to have an African COP when most people on the African continent cannot yet access a vaccine," she said.

Francisca Dommetieru Ziniel, a Ghananian member of the Catholic Youth Network for Environmental Sustainability in Africa, told EarthBeat that COP26 "was expected to be an action COP with a lot of decisions, but unfortunately a lot of dialogue is happening."

"Is there hope for tomorrow?" she asked. "The answer is dependent upon whether rich countries are really ready and committed to the fight against climate change. Developing countries have demonstrated their readiness even though their contributions to climate change is negligible, but they are ready and willing with the support and commitment from rich countries to fight."

Editor's Note: *This article was updated to correct the title of Alok Sharma.*

This story appears in the **COP26 Glasgow** feature series. View the full series.
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