



Hi, my name is Marieke de Jonge and I am the local coordinator for the environmental campaign group, Tunbridge Wells Friends of the Earth.

On Saturday the 6th of November we held an event with stalls, speakers and panels as part of the Global Day of Action in light of COP26.

It has now been a few days since COP26 finished and a 'Glasgow agreement' published and this blog comments on some of the significant outcomes of the talks, from our perspective.

Let me give you a little bit of background first:

COP is short for the Conference of Parties to the United Nations' Framework Convention on Climate Change. The UNFCCC was one of three conventions developed at the "Rio Earth Summit" in 1992 and ratified in 1994. The other two are the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification.

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assesses the science related to climate change and provides reports to policy makers, which they can use in their negotiations. The IPCC have been reporting with increasing certainty that it is human activities, specifically burning fossil fuels, that have caused a steep rise in Greenhouse Gas emissions. A 'safe' limit of carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere was exceeded in 2016 and has stayed over 400ppm since.

At COP21 in 2015, countries reached the Paris Agreement. It meant countries pledged to make fair contributions to reduce their share of GHG emissions (nationally determined contributions or NDCs).

COP26 update

The ultimate aim of COP26 is to phase out use of fossil fuels as quickly as possible in order to keep global warming below an average of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Despite all the pledges, not one country is actually doing enough and we're on track to reach warming of 2.4°C. (Climate Action Tracker).

At the summit in Glasgow, countries were due to strengthen their commitments. This hasn't happened to a sufficient degree. China, Russia and Saudi Arabia only intend to achieve net-zero emissions by 2060 and India by 2070. This means a lot more GHGs will be emitted into the atmosphere before they will start to decline.

While countries have made various pledges to cut their emissions in the last year, the pledges still leave us on track for a 16 per cent rise in emissions by 2030, as opposed to the 45 per cent reduction we actually need (New Scientist).

Some (relatively) positive news:

- a) the US announced measures and got over one 100 countries to pledge cutting 30% of methane emissions by 2030, compared to 2020 levels. Methane is a very powerful greenhouse gas emitted, for example, from livestock agriculture and landfill decay.
- b) a new initiative, called the Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS) was set up to help small island states, who are at great risk of disappearing underwater due to sea level rise.
- c) more than 100 countries pledged to end deforestation by 2030. Reactions to this were mixed as it's still a lot of trees to be cut down before then.
- d) from 2023, UK firms will have to start reporting how they think they will reduce their GHG emissions to net zero, but they will not be legally required to actually reach the goals they set. Not sure therefore how useful this new policy is.

So, the first week of COP26 was a lot of talk from and some promises by (former) world leaders.

Sir David Attenborough warned us that we are “failing to see the bigger picture in pursuit of short-term goals.” He places great trust in younger generations though and hopes that their “motivation should not be fear but hope.”

Former US President, Barack Obama made an impassioned speech too and urged youngsters to “stay angry and frustrated” but advised they should channel those emotions and “push for action” which includes being politically engaged and reaching beyond the crowd of people who are already in agreement. Start with your friends and family!

This second week of COP 26 focused on adaptation to climate change and how much finance wealthier countries should provide to developing countries who are suffering the worst consequences of climate change.

The ‘Green Climate Fund’ was supposed to receive \$100 billion per year from 2020, but this goal has not yet been reached. It has now been postponed to 2025.

The Glasgow agreement is the first one that explicitly mentioned fossil fuels as the main cause of global warming and the general consensus was that fossil fuels must be phased out.

Unfortunately, in the summit’s final text the words “phasing out coal” have been replaced by “phasing down coal” (courtesy of the US, China and India), which is rather ambiguous. Also, it mentions halting subsidies for “inefficient” fossil fuels. As opposed to “efficient” fossil fuels? It sounds a bit like the “blah, blah, blah” and insufficient action that Greta Thunberg used to describe politicians’ talks.

Our group member Steve Walter expresses his sentiment around COP26 in the following poem:

COP26

*What use are tears
in the face
of global disaster...?*

But I cry, cry, cry all the same!

Let's now focus on bringing the topic of climate action back to communities and individuals.

From journalist George Monbiot's recent article it becomes clear that we have some way to go in engaging people on the topic, and our Saturday event was a modest attempt in the grand scheme of things to do just that. He writes that:

"An analysis by the media sustainability group Albert found that "cake" was mentioned 10 times as often as "climate change" on UK TV programmes in 2020. "Scotch egg" received double the mentions of "biodiversity". "Banana bread" beat "wind power" and "solar power" put together.

He goes on to say that:

"I'm not saying the small things don't matter. I'm saying they should not matter to the exclusion of things that matter more.

"The difficult truth is that, to prevent climate and ecological catastrophe, we need to level down.

For that to happen, we need to realise that our eco-systems are in danger of collapsing—everything is inter-connected and if one part is damaged it will have a knock-on effect on other parts in the system. For example, take a close look at the impacts of food production and consumption.

It is fair to say that 'Less is more!' – make things last and don't waste.

So, whilst most of us who were present at the event on Saturday want to 'do our bit for the planet', we must not forget about the bigger picture and keep exerting pressure on governments, global corporations, like fossil fuel producers and financial institutions, and not buy into any 'greenwashing'.

Friends of the Earth is urging us to keep the UK government to account by pointing out the hypocrisy between what is said and what is actually happening.

You can write to your MP to raise the following issues with the government:

1. A new coal mine might be approved in Cumbria. Coal from the proposed Whitehaven coal mine in West Cumbria will be used exclusively to provide coking coal for the steel industry. However, less than 10% is intended to be used by the UK steel industry, with the rest exported abroad.

COP26 update: more than 40 countries, the UK included, have agreed to phase out their use of coal-fired power in 2030s/2040s.

So, what will the UK government do?

2. Cambo oil field

An estimate of 800 million barrels of oil could be extracted off the coast of Shetland. It would continue beyond 2050 – when the UK is supposed to have reached net-zero emissions. That is a lot of off-setting!

3. Liquid gas drilling in Mozambique

The UK pledged \$1.15 billion of UK Export Finance (UKEF) to an offshore Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) project in Mozambique, which is fuelling human rights abuses. Friends of the Earth was granted permission to take the government to court, to challenge the decision to invest in the LNG project, via Judicial Review. The hearing is scheduled for 7 December 2021.

COP26 update: 20 governments have promised to stop financing oil, coal and gas projects beyond their borders. The list includes Canada, the UK and the US. The move will come into effect by the end of 2022.

So, what will the UK government do?

4. Drilling for oil in Horse Hill, Surrey

Ministers are fighting to allow oil drilling to begin in Surrey. There was a protest demo on the Global Day of Action. The court case appealing against Surrey County Council's decision to allow the proposed drilling is being heard on 16 November 2021.

5. In addition, the UK government recently decided to

1. to cut air passenger duty for internal UK flights
2. build a lot more roads and
3. cap a tax on fuel for cars

while refusing to invest in home insulation that would both reduce emissions from heating and cut people's energy bills.

Lastly, I remain optimistic and a believer in the positive effects of behavioural change. I do think everyone's individual actions together make a big difference.

Personally, I started by looking at my carbon footprint (there are several free carbon footprint calculators you can do online) and, even though I mainly did fairly short journeys, cutting my car use to once or twice a month has made a massive difference. In fact, it has cut about 25% or 2 tonnes of carbon of my overall emissions – the equivalent weight of a small elephant!

In summary, each and every one of us can make a difference. Through our own actions and by holding governments and businesses to account. Keep faith.

Main sources of information:

COP26 broadcasts, New Scientist magazine, BBC News, The Guardian, The Times, The New York Times and Friends of the Earth