

## **COP26 – A Fish-eye View. Early reflections.**

The old imperative ‘When you’re in a hole, stop digging!’ must surely apply when the hole is filling with water. Yet COP26 has failed to stop extractivism (or, ‘keep it in the ground’) to the extent required to keep to 1.5C, the necessary, if hardly sufficient, limit to average global temperature rise.

That said, COP26 took place against a new backdrop of acceptance at last of the facts of human-induced climate change. New language entered the final document, the Glasgow Climate Pact, that points to inclusion of themes previously more in the domain of civil society organisations. These include: the rights of indigenous peoples (although their vital role in protecting our natural resources, underscored across the COP, and their implied land rights, was not explicitly recognised); climate justice and the just transition, a theme of trade unions and the ILO, which identifies fairness for workers and communities as a prerequisite for a 1.5C limit; dietary changes to reduce meat consumption and thus curtail deforestation; the challenge of a shift from fast to slow fashion; other behaviour changes and approaches to transport (e.g. using access and mobility as criteria for policy).

Significantly, though, there was no mention of a Green New Deal as such, although it could be argued that its main components do feature. The inclusion of reference to fossil fuels for the first time was welcome, if too weak, as were commitments to address ‘inefficient’ fossil fuel subsidies and to stop investing in overseas coal plants. Reference to loss and damage was also an important innovation, although little progress was made on the question of developed countries paying for adaptation measures because they were the source of the losses and damage.

What struck me about the COP, as well as its openness to civil society language, was the scope for civil society and the private sector to do much of the ‘heavy lifting’. Pavilions at the COP devoted to multi-level governance (which included the Commonwealth Call to Action for Sustainable Urbanisation, championed by a cluster of Commonwealth organisations), to education and training (see Nature+Zone of IUCN and partners) and to private sector initiatives (the ‘Race to Zero’ Coalition across private and public sector actors: <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/race-to-zero-campaign>) signalled that there is growing recognition of the critical role of civil society organisations and the private sector, which has around \$130 trillion ready to invest, and is aware of the risk of stranded assets. The problem here, though, is that this money is so hard to spend. Implementation of mitigation and adaptation measure requires a skilled workforce ‘on the ground’ that is not yet widely enough available.

From this perspective, solving the problem of global heating must be addressed through paradiplomacy, or sub-state action, in parallel with state action. It is here that civil society organisations can redouble their efforts to secure private sector support, and also support the ‘Race to Zero’, while maintaining conditionalities such as a fair transition, support for indigenous and poor people’s rights to their patrimony and to a clean and safe environment.

Finally, what of the Commonwealth role? Commonwealth organisations have been advocating a more visible presence of the Commonwealth in international negotiations and the multilateral space for many years. At COP26, the Secretariat invested what must have

been considerable resources in just such a venture in the Commonwealth pavilion. These events had their foundation in the acknowledged achievements of the Commonwealth Blue Charter initiative, and extended to climate finance and the emergent Living Lands initiative, modelled on the Blue Charter, i.e. relying on individual or a small number of states to lead on particular themes, as for the nine Action Groups of the Blue Charter.

While the Commonwealth pavilion succeeded in attracting a lively and appreciative audience including senior diplomats, there was some dismay in the final stage of negotiation when India, with about half the Commonwealth population, insisted on substituting 'phase out' with 'phase down' fossil fuels, to the dismay and deep concern of the small states, particularly the SIDS, comprising about half of the Commonwealth's states. India has committed to Net Zero by 2070, too late for 1.5C, but there are some who think this date will be brought forward.

This tempts comparison with the outcome of the 2015 Malta CHOGM, where Heads moved on almost immediately to Paris to agree the Paris Accords, thence to New York to commit to the Sustainable Development Goals. Should the Commonwealth not have presented a united front in Glasgow? However, the success of the Commonwealth in Paris followed the CHOGM process of Heads meeting face to face and unaccompanied by officials, probably a prerequisite for such an outcome. It should be noted that the failure in Copenhagen followed on from the 2009 Trinidad and Tobago CHOGM. Also, recent oil finds in Commonwealth developing countries will make unanimity on extraction problematic unless an equitable solution is found.

Although we will of course never know what might have transpired at Glasgow to 'keep 1.5C alive' had the Kigali CHOGM taken place before COP26, we can at least take some comfort in the commitment to return to addressing enhanced ambition for NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions) annually, first in Egypt (Sharm-El-Sheikh) in 2022. The Commonwealth must make a major effort that its 53, or by then perhaps 54, nations speak with a common voice to advocate for positions consistent with a 1.5C limit.

*Dr Nicholas S J Watts FRSA, 22 November 2021*