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FEBRUARY  
2022

## FROM GLASGOW TO SHARM EL-SHEIKH (COP27): How to raise climate ambition?

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The Glasgow Climate Pact defined 2020–2030 as a crucial decade for climate change mitigation. Scientific experts say multiple strategies and policies must be designed and implemented over the next eight years in order to limit global warming to 1.5°C. However, the latest United Nations studies report a lack of ambition in mitigation strategies. The most recent COP26 held in Glasgow (United Kingdom) brought no breakthrough.

Why do climate negotiations fail? To answer this question, this article will address the multiple meanings of “climate ambition”. We analyse and contrast the main actors’ perspectives on ambition: the ecomodernist vision of Western countries, the limits to growth requested by prominent scientists, the post-developmental approaches of the Global South, and the compensatory vision of the fossil fuel-dependent countries.

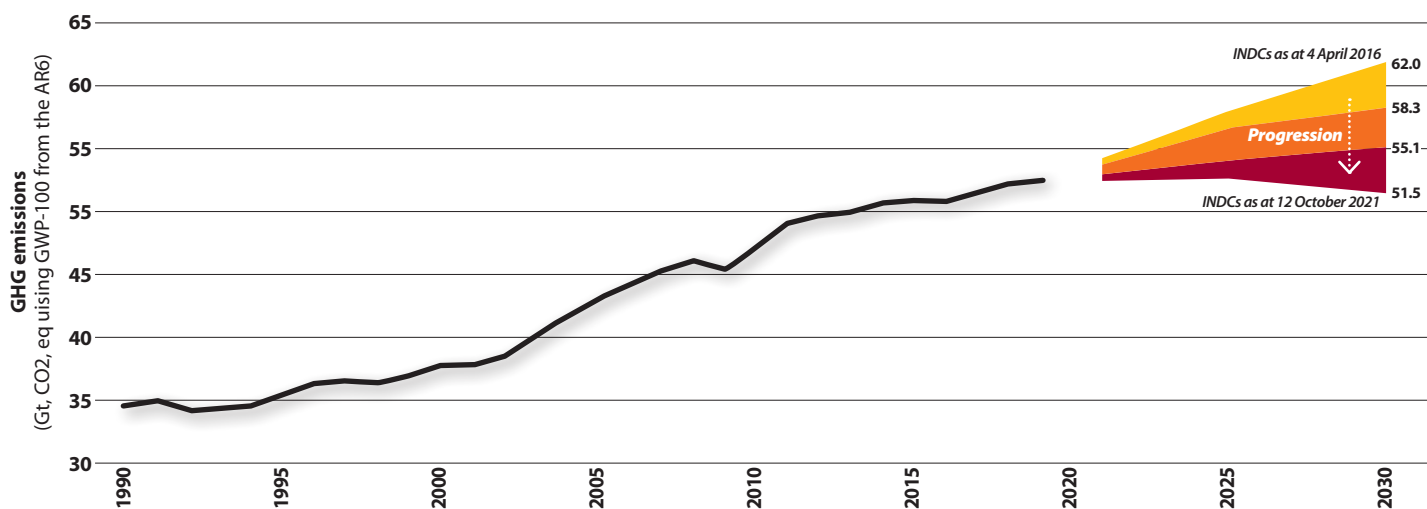
A few months before COP27 – to be held in November 2022 in Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt) – it is essential to find common ground between the different visions. If we want 2020–2030 to be a successful decade, a shared definition of climate ambition has to emerge.

The history of climate politics is the history of an eternal trade-off: the more ambitious the mitigation goals of an international climate agreement are, the less states are willing to ratify it. The different approaches of the Kyoto Protocol (1997) and the Paris Agreement (2015) are proof of this. Having learned from the failure of the ambitious Kyoto Protocol to rally UN parties behind it – key states such as the United States (US) never ratified it and others like Canada and Russia later withdrew – the Paris Agreement put forward less ambitious mechanisms in order to be more inclusive. The Glasgow Climate Pact from last year’s COP26 was also shaped by trying to walk this fine line. Although some reports highlighted the advances made in Glasgow, a vast number of negotiators and commentators expressed disappointment with the lack of ambition and commitment to decisive change.

As Figure 1 shows, these reports stress the tremendous gap between the 45% emissions reductions (by 2030 and in comparison to 2010 levels) required to achieve the 1.5°C goal and the 16.3% increase that can be inferred from the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)<sup>1</sup> communicated by the parties. Further, while some political achievements were made at COP26, such as the Global Methane Pledge, the Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use and the US–China Joint Glasgow Declaration, these agreements are non-binding and

1. To comply with the Paris Agreement, each party must prepare and communicate the specific amount of GHG emissions it intends to reduce. These data, which parties have to report to the UN registry, are known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). By aggregating all the NDCs submitted to date, we can make projections of future GHG emissions.

**Figure 1. Historical evolution of global GHG emissions (1990–2020) and estimated rate for the 2020s**



**Note:** Note: As observed in the graph, the level of global emissions in 2019 was 52.4 Gt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year. According to the latest NDCs presented by the parties, global emissions will rise to 51.5–58.3 Gt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year. Hence, 55Gt is used as the expected value, a 16% increase in emissions compared to 47.4 Gt in 2010.  
**Source:** UNFCCC Secretariat (2021).

lack legal force. Two decades ago they would have been remarkable, but today, with **415 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> ppm in the atmosphere**, they are tepid promises in a burning environment.

Finally, the most notable achievement of the Glasgow Climate Pact – the commitment to end fossil fuel subsidies and reduce the use of coal – was watered down by India’s last-minute intervention, which demanded the language be changed from a forceful “*phase-out of unabated coal power*” to a milder “*phase-down of unabated coal power*”. Despite strong opposition from the European Union (EU), Switzerland, Mexico and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the change was accepted in order to promote broader ratification of the pact.

In response to the perceived lack of success, the Glasgow Climate Pact includes no fewer than eight requests for greater ambition at next year’s COP27, to be hosted by Egypt in Sharm El-Sheikh. All countries are expected to raise their ambition and commit to a one-year NDC review process (which would be extraordinary, as the Paris Rulebook requires it only once every five years).

But if 2022 is to be the year of ambition, what does ambition actually mean to each actor? It is not that different actors are unambitious or simply do not care about global warming, as is often assumed. Instead, different and often contradictory understandings of ambition overlap, painting a variegated picture of the best mitigation pathways. In preparation for COP27, it is important to map and understand the different approaches to stabilising the climate, the common ground between them, and what obstacles governments face in stepping up ambitions and delivering on their goals.

### Green growth advocates

Based on their NDCs, the United Kingdom (UK), EU and US presented themselves as the most ambitious actors in Glasgow. As host of COP26, the UK accelerated its trajectory towards net zero by 2050, promising to cut emissions by 68% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. In their NDC, **the European Union and its member states claimed** to be “the most greenhouse gas efficient major economy” and committed to at least a 55% reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2030 compared to 1990 levels (p. 18). A far cry from Donald Trump’s climate crisis denialism, the Biden administration sought to keep alive the goal of a 1.5°C global average temperature increase by reducing emissions by 50–52% below 2005 levels by 2030, while undertaking to achieve net zero by no later than 2050. All three powers have claimed to be ahead of other states in their ambition to become the most climate-friendly states and regions. But what do they understand by the term ambition?

In general, the ambition of Western governments that lead climate negotiations is to reconcile the sustainability of the Earth’s ecosystems with continued socio-economic growth. As summarised in the EU’s **NDC**: “Ambitious climate action is not just a way to confront the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, but is also a growth strategy that is a winning strategy, not just for Europe itself but also globally” (p. 2). This view is optimistic, confident that the transition to climate neutrality will bring significant opportunities for economic growth, business, jobs and technological development. If all policy areas and sectors transform and enhance their energy-efficiency and carbon neutrality, economies will expand and lifestyles become more sustainable, reducing their ecological footprint.

As an example, the EU climate strategy, the **European Green Deal**, has been presented as a “sustainable growth strategy” that aims “to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use” (p. 2). Efforts are placed on accelerating a clean energy transition, implementing circular and blue economy action plans and developing smart infrastructures for carbon capture and storage. The COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans are green and compatible with the EU’s 2030 climate targets and the objective of reaching carbon neutrality by 2050.

This approach can be interpreted as a “green growth” strategy and is shared by ecomodernist thinkers, many of whom are associated with **The Breakthrough Institute** in Oakland, California. The authors of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto* offer an optimistic vision of a future in which technological and social modernisation can expedite the decoupling of universal human development from environmental impact. In their view, building resource- and land-efficient technologies and improving modern energy services can simultaneously contribute to the goals of climate stabilisation and human progress.

Ecomodernists look for market innovation strategies and close cooperation between the private and public sectors to accelerate the green transition. For example, the economist Mariana **Mazzucato has been an inspiration to the EU**, recommending multi-actor and multi-sector cooperation to enable bottom-up experimentation and learning and to co-create policies to tackle environmental and other inter-connected societal challenges. Others, like the economist Jeremy Rifkin, more openly trust the free market to instigate a Third Industrial Revolution with a zero-carbon infrastructure: “with this disruption, the market is a guardian angel looking over humanity” (Rifkin, 2019: 222).

In this ecomodernist framework, the main preoccupation is how to encourage other states to work faster towards net zero emissions. According to ecomodernists, what divides Western states from most others is a matter of will and care for the planet and future generations. Efforts are thus geared towards stimulating and financing innovation and proper management, while adding instruments like the **EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism** so that others are compelled to accelerate the green growth transition.

## Between degrowth and the doughnut

While the above understanding of ambition has gained significant economic and social support over the last decade, it is not the sole contender. A growing number of scientists argue that the current growth pathway is incompatible with a finite planet, and therefore insist that climate ambition should consist of efforts to keep growth within planetary limits, or even promote degrowth schemes.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has measured and assessed anthropogenic climate change and its environmental and socio-economic impact since 1988, is increasingly embracing this approach. A prominent actor at every COP, the IPCC is alarmed by the slow pace at which

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governments undertake regulations and policy changes. In a **report published in August 2021 by Working Group I**,<sup>2</sup> the IPCC argues that the tipping points have long been reached and “[m]any changes due to past and future greenhouse gases emissions are irreversible for centuries to millennia, especially changes in the ocean, ice sheets and global sea level” (p. 21). The report also outlines five possible future scenarios, each according to the level of GHG emissions and the changes projected in the climate system. In the projected scenario where emissions remain around current levels until the middle of the century, the average global surface temperature in 2081–2100 is very likely to be 2.1°C to 3.5°C higher. This would have a severe impact on the climate system and extreme weather events will more frequently occur.

The crux of the report is that even in the low and very low emissions scenarios, whose accomplishment would require a drastic cut in emissions compared to current levels, the global surface temperature will continue to increase until at least mid-century and the best estimate for 2100 would be between 1.4°C and 1.8°C (pp. 12–14). Thus, the recently leaked draft

2. The IPCC has three working groups: Working Group I deals with the scientific basis of climate change; Working Group II studies the vulnerabilities, the impacts, and adaptation to climate change; Working Group III works on climate change mitigation.

report of IPCC Working Group III (to be published in spring 2022) argues that to limit warming to below 1.5°C compared to preindustrial levels requires “rapid GHG emissions reductions and fundamental structural changes at global scale” (p.14). For example, this would entail “lower[ing] demand” and a radical shift in lifestyles and diets, since “plant-based diets can reduce GHG emissions by up to 50% compared to the average emission intensive Western diet” (p. 20)

What these scientific observations imply is that rather than a green transition, the ambition of a climate-neutral future requires growth to be limited. The IPCC report thus suggests that the ecomodernist assumption that growth can be combined with sensitive consideration for the environment is flawed. Other scientific studies point in similar directions. For

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instance, the International Energy Agency challenges the possibility of achieving the current eco-transition due to the limitations imposed by the lack of access to **critical materials** – copper, nickel, graphite and lithium, among others.

Environmental activists and critical scholars have for decades called for growth to be limited or reduced, arguing that continuous growth is incompatible with a planet with finite resources (Latouche, 2009). Following scientific evidence, these scholars deem green growth and sustainable development proposals clearly insufficient. They estimate that if GDP continues to rise, emissions reductions cannot be fast enough to stay within the carbon budgets set by the Paris Agreement (Hickel and Kallis, 2020). The bottom line is that continuous growth and use of materials cannot be decoupled from ecological collapse. In these views, the ambition of green growth is little more than a capitalist fallacy based on the faith in linear development and the belief that technological progress will revert the environmental mess.

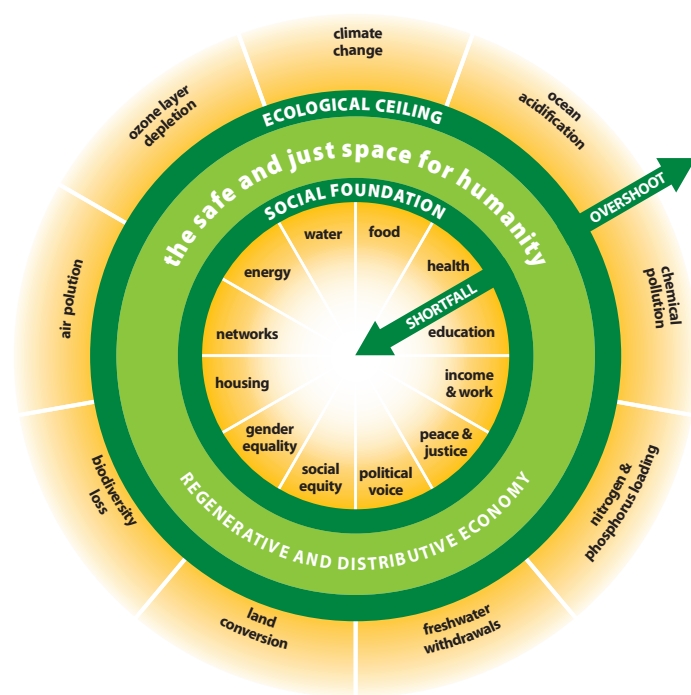
Instead, these critical perspectives hint at a different kind of ambition in which linear economic growth is no longer desirable. Kate Raworth (2017) uses the metaphor of the doughnut to suggest how to thrive “in balance”, aspiring to meet social needs – the inner ring of the doughnut – while at the same time avoiding overly stressing the Earth’s ecosystems – outer ring of the doughnut (see figure 2). Similarly, degrowth perspectives contend that it is necessary to contract the economy and rediscover alternative ways of living a sustainable life; one in which wellbeing and

development could be achieved by limiting material affluence and measured by indicators other than GDP (Kallis, 2019).

## Post-development

Besides scientists and critical theorists, another perspective challenges the Western conceptualisation of ambition: that of Global South states like China, India and South Africa. Since the Paris Agreement included them in the mitigation scheme, they have gained bargaining power in the climate politics arena (although green growers have repeatedly questioned their commitment to fight climate change, citing China’s delayed carbon peak and India’s reluctance to phase out coal). Global South countries have reiterated the need to link the concept of climate ambition to that of development goals and climate justice. They sustain that environmental protection cannot be achieved without greater international efforts to eradicate poverty and social grievances. The persistent need to enforce the social pillar of sustainable development can be traced back to every UN summit held since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit – it was present at Copenhagen in 1995, in the Millennium Declaration, in Johannesburg 2002, in Rio 2012 and again in the 2030 Agenda. Due to the current failure of the **climate aid**

Figure 2. Doughnut Economics



Source: Raworth (2022).

fund<sup>3</sup> and the Western resistance to a loss and damage facility, Global South nations have sought to make their NDCs conditional on the adequate transfer of financial, technology and capacity building support. They aspire to a future free from carbon dioxide and North–South differences.

Additional funding is not the only way these countries can be supported to step up ambition. They stress that climate justice must be taken into account, particularly the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC). Their historical responsibility for the current CO<sub>2</sub> atmospheric concentration is limited. In terms of equity, there is an enormous distance between Western and non-Western countries' per capita emissions. With an Indian producing about 1.8 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per year and an American consuming 14 (Friedlingstein et al., 2021), they demand that the fair share of mitigation be reallocated. As India puts it in its NDC, for those countries that still face complex development challenges, “the critical issue is the gap between their equitable share of the global carbon space and the actual share of carbon space that will be accessible to them”. It is, thus, not the 1.5°C goal they are challenging, it is the expected distribution of mitigation efforts. The remaining carbon budget should be spent by those whose socioeconomic needs require it. For the rest, in a vision that recalls that of selective degrowth, India also supports the implementation of lifestyle changes that would make humanity less dependent on energy and more sustainable.

The need to reshape Western development is not new. Post-development theories and other alter-globalisation perspectives have historically stressed the need to restructure economic power while combating global warming. As the Argentinian sociologist Maristella Svampa (2019: 18–19) puts it, back in the 1970s and 1980s economists like Cesar Furtado and Manfred Max-Neef had already exposed the ecological limitations of a consumerist system that could only benefit the developed nations and the “necessarily small elites” of developing countries. This perspective is different to that of “degrowthers”, inasmuch as it does not put the focus on (de)growth but on its distribution: “the corollary of this perspective was that the privileged populations of the planet would have to lower their excessive consumption patterns and diminish their

rates of economic growth in order to reduce the pressure on natural resources and the environment” (p. 19). They demand a reallocation of global power while mitigating climate change. Otherwise, as a group of scientists led by Sonja Klinsky and Saleemul Huq (2016) put it, excluding equity and climate justice to pursue the Western perception of climate ambition would only favour those who are already privileged.

This vision is further legitimised by a recent study on how each country's NDC should be determined. Led by Lavanya Rajamany, the proposal builds on the principles of sustainable development and CBDR-RC to determine the remaining carbon budget of each G20 member (2021: 997). According to this study, if the 1.5°C goal is to be achieved in a fair manner, by 2030 India's emissions should not exceed its 2010 level. The United

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States, the European Union and the United Kingdom, on the contrary, should achieve emissions reductions of 120%, 150% and 205%, respectively.

### **Climate laggards**

While climate deniers have lost credibility worldwide, a new stance is challenging the Western definition of climate ambition. With Australia, Japan and OPEC as the leading players in the group, “climate laggard” countries accept both the existence of global warming and its anthropogenic nature but consider that the measures necessary to achieve the 1.5°C goal are too strict and costly for their fossil fuel-dependent economies. These countries' comments on the IPCC report, leaked by the BBC and Greenpeace last October, clearly illustrate their position. OPEC, for example, asked for the following conclusion to be removed from the report: “If warming is to be restricted to 2°C, about 30% of oil, 50% of gas, and 80% of coal reserves will remain unburnable”. Japan also requested the removal from the final version of the IPCC recommendations that coal and gas-fired power stations be dismantled within a decade (Carter & Dowler, 2021). None of the petitions were accepted by the IPCC.

But again, to reach ambitious future climate agreements it is key to understand how these countries justify a delay in climate action. Saudi Arabia's NDC strategy provides some clues. Because oil production,

3. At the Copenhagen COP (2009), the parties agreed to mobilise \$100 billion per year in climate assistance from 2020. However, this goal – criticised as insufficient – has not been reached.

processing and export represent 24% of its 2019 GDP, “economic diversification is a key factor influencing the stability and sustainability of the Kingdom” (p. 3). Its level of ambition is, thus, closely linked to the acceleration of such diversification. The economic dependence on fossil fuels can also be observed in the NDC submitted by **Australia**, which is one of the world’s largest exporters of energy, coal and liquefied natural gas. But a higher level of ambition would not only harm its trade balances. According to data from the Global Carbon Project, while coal is no longer the leading source of Australia’s energy mix, gas consumption has more than doubled in the last two decades alongside an increase in oil use (see Figure 3). This energy mix explains why Australia’s mitigation actions are oriented towards technology improvement and private choices, rather than carbon taxes, caps and public mandates.

Proponents of a transition that supports countries that heavily depend on fossil fuel industries have been making this argument for over a decade. As Norman Swazo (2010) put it after the 2009 **Copenhagen disagreement**, it will be hard to achieve higher levels of global ambition without assisting those countries whose economies will be most affected by climate mitigation strategies. Based on the case of Saudi Arabia, he exposes how fossil fuel economic dependence has been an issue since the very beginning of the climate mitigation regime. In this respect, article 4 of **the UNFCCC** already made the mitigation efforts of developing nations conditional on the transfer of funds and technology to those countries “whose economies are highly dependent on income generated from the production, processing and export, and/or on consumption of fossil fuels and associated energy-intensive products”. It is from this perspective that Swazo considers the compensation argument. If the international community expects these countries to

rapidly substitute their main income sources, some extra funding should be granted to diversify their economy. Some developed nations have already adopted initiatives that incorporate this perspective. One of the best examples of it is the EU’s **Just Transition Mechanism**, which is expected to mobilise €55 billion between 2021 and 2027. Nonetheless, according to climate laggards, the current initiatives are insufficient. It might be just a negotiating strategy, but a greater distribution of costs will be required for them to give up the role of global fossil fuel providers.

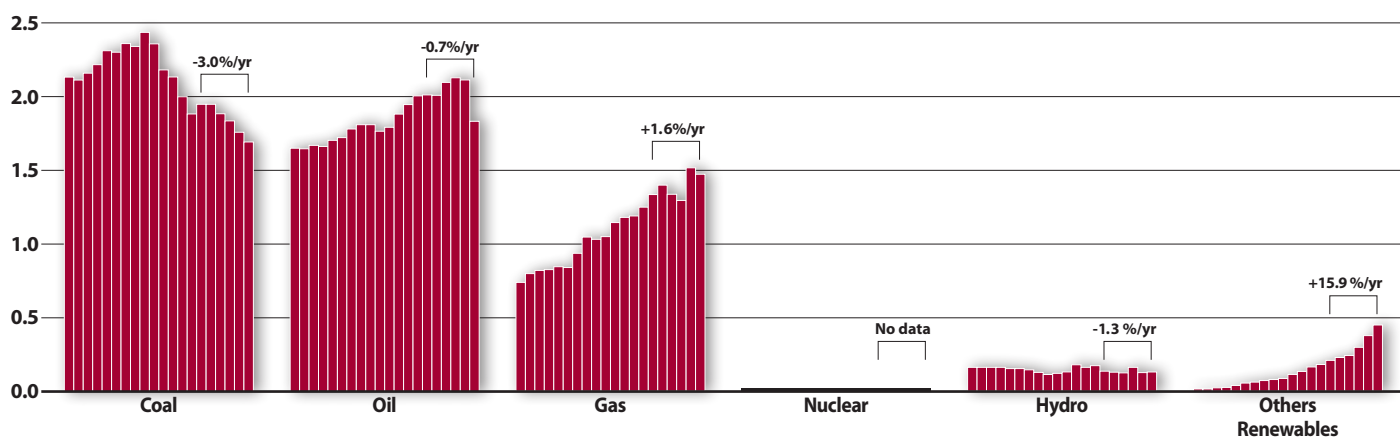
### Conclusion: In the name of ambition

Since the Paris Agreement was approved in 2015, calls to intensify mitigation efforts have not ceased. The UN Secretary-General, civil society organisations and many other non-state actors have expressed their concerns over the ambitions of current NDCs, which are deemed insufficient to meet the 1.5°C goal. As climate activist Greta Thunberg put it, COP26 was “a **global north greenwash festival**”.

The Glasgow Climate Pact itself acknowledges such disappointing results, calling on parties to revise their NDCs and increase ambition for COP27. However, the parties and other stakeholders have diverging understandings of the concept of “ambition”. While Western countries often steal the limelight and reduce ambition to a green growth strategy to mitigate climate change, alternative understandings of ambition must also be considered. Firstly, no political conception of ambition will be useful if it is not endorsed by the scientific community. Mitigation strategies that are criticised on scientific grounds are bound to fail. In order to be realistic, both the atmospheric carbon limits and the availability of critical materials must be included in the mitigation equation. This will

**Figure 3. Annual energy consumption in Australia, 2000–2020**

3.0 EJ — Annual growth rates from 2015-2020



Source: Friedlingstein et al. (2021).

require alternatives to the current growth paradigms to be introduced. Secondly, global inequality cannot be neglected. The high levels of ambition required to overcome the climate emergency will not be achieved if the Global South does not see mitigation efforts as an opportunity to further its socio-economic agenda. Thus, mitigation strategies must be strongly linked to the reduction of inequality and poverty. Finally, states whose economies and development are strongly dependent on the fossil fuel industries might also need some incentives to rapidly transform their economic and social structures. Otherwise, a green transition will not be possible: their economies and societies **will collapse faster than glaciers retreat**.

In sum, ambition must be collectively defined. All the perspectives should be considered and contradictions recognised and accommodated in order to reach compromises and long-standing solutions. COP26 established that this will be a crucial decade of action and ambition in which most mitigation efforts must be implemented. To get it on track, at COP27 ambitions must cohere in the quest for success.

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