

## CLIMATE JUSTICE AT COP26 IN GLASGOW: Between disappointment and tentative hope

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*The issue of climate justice took centre stage in Glasgow, both inside negotiating rooms and on the streets. However, with developed countries failing to deliver on the \$100 billion goal and resisting the creation of a dedicated loss and damage financing facility, trust between high-emitting nations and climate victims was badly damaged. Still, the Glasgow Pact text offers some cause for cautious optimism that climate justice will become more prominent on the UNFCCC agenda moving forward. A delivery plan for increased climate finance was devised, more support is promised for technical assistance with loss and damage, and a “dialogue” on loss and damage financing will be initiated. Further, some advances were made on broader climate justice concerns related to ensuring a just transition in both the Global North and South.*

Proponents and activists of climate justice were largely left disappointed by the **Glasgow Climate Pact** adopted on November 13<sup>th</sup> 2021 – one day after the 26th UN climate conference was meant to close. The “common but differentiated responsibilities” of developed and developing countries and the commitment of the former to climate finance now figure among the most contentious issues in international climate negotiations. The debates raise questions about the historical responsibility for the climate crisis, and the issue was only further aggravated by the failure of rich countries to deliver on the **pledge they made at COP15** in 2009 to jointly mobilise \$100 billion a year in climate finance for developing countries by 2020.

An area where disagreements came to a head was the proposal by the G77 + China (representing 134 developing countries) to create a dedicated funding facility for “loss and damage” resulting from overheating, flooding and other phenomena that irreversibly destroy livelihoods in countries on the frontline of the climate crisis. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, loss and damage has – in theory – become the **third pillar** of international climate policy, alongside mitigation and adaptation. However, while associations of developing countries like the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), civil society and climate activists have moved the issue to the top of their agendas, it continues to be side-lined in official party negotiations. At COP26, the EU, United States, Australia and other rich nations blocked the request for a new funding facility, fearing it would equate to accepting

legal liability for the climate crisis and would open the floodgates to unlimited claims for compensation. As Jacob Werksman, a negotiator for the EU, put it: the UNFCCC regime was set up as a forum for “international cooperation” to stabilise the climate, not to “negotiate what one country should, on a theory of liability, be paying another country on the basis of what they’re experiencing in terms of impacts.”

But questions of responsibility will continue to shape any future climate negotiations. In fact, the issue will only gain momentum in coming years, as climate risks and disasters multiply and too little money flows towards the adaptation efforts of developing countries. Yet, despite the resistance of rich nations to a loss and damage facility, the Glasgow Pact text offers some cause for careful optimism that climate justice will become more prominent on the UNFCCC agenda moving forward. Besides foreseeing financial support to operationalise the Santiago Network – a new body created at COP25 to support technical assistance on dealing with loss and damage – the pact promises to establish a “dialogue” on loss and damage financing. Another important symbolic gesture was the joint pledge by the subnational governments of Scotland and Wallonia and five major philanthropic funds of around €6 million to encourage the Glasgow Loss and Damage Facility into existence.

While the issue of loss and damage is generally framed along a North–South axis that reflects the uneven geographical impacts of climate change across nations, the Glasgow summit also saw some tentative advances on broader climate justice concerns. Mostly emerging under the heading of the “just transition”, they relate to tackling the unequal social distribution of climate change impacts and ensuring fair mitigation and adaptation policies, both *across* and *within* nations of the Global North and South.

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The declaration on Supporting the Conditions for a Just Transition Internationally, which was adopted during the first week of COP26, goes beyond the focus on labour rights of the 2015 International Labour Organization (ILO) Guidelines for a just transition and its emphasis on building net-zero economies without leaving behind workers that rely on carbon-intensive industries. Addressing the wider social, racial and gender injustices that are exacerbated by climate change, the declaration advocates for procedural and distributive justice through green policymaking that engages diverse social groups and benefits the most vulnerable.

Another novelty of the Just Transition Declaration is its global ambition. As the roots of the just transition debate **lie in the trade union movements of Western industrialised countries**, it came as no surprise that the declaration was only signed by these countries and the EU. However, while the signatories pledge to apply just transition principles in their domestic climate plans, they also call for climate funding allocated to poorer countries to be subjected to the same standards. Further consolidating this global ambition, a paragraph on the global supply chains required to build net-zero economies aspires to create decent and equitable employment that respects human rights across borders.

Public debate on climate policy's social justice dimension was fuelled in the runup to COP26 by the alarming reports on the greatly imbalanced contributions different income groups make to carbon emissions released by **Oxfam** and the **Stockholm Environment Institute** in September. The Just Transition Declaration signals growing political willingness to address the issue, especially within the EU and its member states. The question remains how the just transition rhetoric of COP26, the **European Green Deal** (EGD) and related national-level policy initiatives will be translated into concrete policies and on-the-ground action. Will these initiatives seek greater equity within existing socioeconomic structures and power relations, or will they push for transformative justice approaches that address the mantra of continuous economic growth and systemic injustices as the root causes of the environmental and social crises we face? Reasonable hopes exist of a third way being found between these two options. The EGD, presented as the EU's new "sustainable growth strategy", but which at the same time aspires towards long-term systemic change, is a good example in this regard.

The question of implementation also raises the important issue of multilevel governance and action. Given the strong local dimension of just transition challenges (e.g. around practical issues such as professional retraining programmes, energy poverty, neighbourhoods suffering air and water pollution, and access to affordable and healthy food, to green spaces and "cooling islands", and to information on incoming risks and disasters), closer cooperation with and support for local governments and cities will be particularly important. Many cities are already working on **promising approaches** to a just transition in sectors such as housing, energy efficiency and transport that have strong transformative justice elements and foster new forms of participation and inclusion. For example, the City of Amsterdam is implementing Kate Raworth's "**doughnut economics**" theory, which seeks to create well-being for all within the planet's boundaries.

COP26 was certainly no breakthrough on climate justice, and the failure of rich countries to deliver on financing promises undermined trust between high-emitting nations and climate victims. However, greater willingness to engage with loss and damage and progress on just transition pledges that seek to tackle inequalities between the rich and poor in both the Global North and South provide some room for hope.