

COP26: Asking the Wrong Questions?

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Will [COP26 in Glasgow](#) in November 2021 succeed? Will it be the breakthrough moment, when a historic deal is agreed that turns a corner in the [trajectory of global greenhouse gas emissions](#) and sets the world on track to limit global temperature increases to 1.5°C? Is that even a realistic outcome to hope COP26 can achieve if the best possible circumstances, discussions and agenda items prevail?

COP26 has many laudable aims:

- Within the voluntary pledges system agreed at Paris Conference in 2015, countries are being asked to layout more ambitious emission reduction targets for their countries in the run up to the conference. The hope is that collectively these more [ambitious national targets](#) will address the fact that pledges made up to end of July 2021 actually corresponded to a [16% increase in emissions](#) between 2010 and 2030. This would equate to around [2.7°C temperature increase](#) by the end of this century. More ambitious national pledges would be needed to deliver a 45% reduction in emissions globally by 2030 to put the world on track to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C (to meet the 'well below 2°C' aim agreed in Paris in 2015).
- Commitment to global collaboration to protect communities and natural habitats where these are threatened by climate change.
- Securing \$100 billion in funding from countries and organisation around the world to pay for changes needed to both reduce emissions and adapt to however much climate change ends up happening.
- Finalising the rules which govern the Paris Agreement signed in 2015. This involves agreeing details of how permits to emit greenhouse gases will be traded and how transparency can be used to encourage countries to keep to their pledges.
- Perhaps most significant of all, is the last sub-point under the heading of 'Finalising the Paris Rulebook', which is brokering an agreement to address the gap outlined in the first bullet point above. What is the world going to do about the fact that collectively they agreed this 1.5°C target, but individually there is a reluctance to commit to sufficient action, as taken together countries pledges put [world on track for approximately 2.7°C of global warming](#).

This last point starts to reveal the true situation. The real drivers of what happens and doesn't happen in the world are outside of climate conferences and UN's climate process.

Even if all the objectives of COP26 were delivered, there is little chance this would lead to world's economies making the change of direction required to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C. What use is the Paris Agreement, and its rulebook, if the voluntary pledges countries make

as part of it don't add up to the collectively agreed goal? What use are those pledges if they don't include all emissions (aviation and shipping are both currently excluded) and there is no enforcement mechanism to ensure countries actually meet their pledges?

So COP26 is still [asking the wrong questions](#). It's shying away from questions like "What would a fair allocation of the remaining carbon budget for 1.5°C look like?" and "How can our economies be reshaped to remove the stimulus for continued fossil fuel extraction and use globally?". Instead it is still asking for higher voluntary pledges but with no enforcement mechanism, and asking how our current economic structures (which brought the world into this predicament) can be used to support both greenhouse gas emission reduction and climate adaptation. Fundamentally, putting the most significant agenda points at the bottom of the agenda and not even being prepared to question the global economic status quo leaves COP26 little chance of creating the breakthrough moment that resets global emissions on to a sustainable downwards trajectory.

To get to the bottom of what's going on we need to take a step back from focusing on COP26. The root of the problem seems to be that for most countries (at least the ones with most significant emissions) climate change and biodiversity loss are somewhere between secondary objectives and side issues that they don't really want to confront head on. For most countries, their economy and delivering economic growth as measured by GDP ([Gross Domestic Product](#)), are still front and centre in terms of political priorities. That means any action addressing mass extinction or climate change must fit in with economic business as usual. International trade deals to facilitate economic growth are still viewed as more important than international climate agreements. For as long as this remains true, the countries with the largest economies (with the biggest emissions) will continue to turn up to climate conferences such as COP26 and focus on the wrong questions. As to asking the right questions, this would rightly cast doubt on the assumption that perpetual economic growth is a valid ultimate goal. The notion that many or perhaps even most countries might participate in COP26 without promoting their country's self interest, without assuming their economy will get bigger over the next decade, and heaven forbid, accepting that action on climate change trumps all other priorities, is still inconceivable.

However this problem of governments [asking the wrong questions](#) is not new, or unique to action on climate change. In part the issue is that governments continue to accept and embrace a purely economic framing of progress.

If the only purpose of our societies is to grow their economies, and the only way of growing an economy is to make it bigger in financial terms regardless of non-financial costs or longer-term impacts, then it logically follows that to achieve 'progress' requires them to perpetually increase the value of economic transactions – buying and selling of goods and services that have monetary value. This motivates light regulation of financial markets, which are seen as efficiently allocating money to maximise such economic transactions, with little to no concern about non-financial costs or longer-term impacts. This trend is playing out in real time through

deforestation, and expansion of mining and other resource extraction globally. This has been referred to as '[the great acceleration](#)'. It is also the objective of the Dasgupta Review, which has [rightly been criticised](#).

However, our economies aren't just expanding in ways that encroach on biodiversity and earth systems (such as the climate). As was recently set out in the documentary '[The Social Dilemma](#)', financial markets have been expanded to colonise people's time, attention and behaviour. Social media and search engine companies have business models that sell access to people's attention [for the purposes of advertising](#). Such companies use automated digital tools to maximise the number of people using their platforms and the amount of time each person spends on these platforms, with the ultimate goal of maximising the amount of advertising they can show them. In the same way that a shift from a market economy to a capitalist economy has created a very extractive and more recently financialised approach resulting in the negative consequences of biodiversity loss and climate change. The marketising and financialising of people's attention and manipulation of their choices, also has negative implications. These include damage to people's mental health, the propagation of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Most significantly perhaps is the loss of common understanding that is critical for a cohesive society, caused by the 'customisation' of what each user sees. Such a common understanding of the current situation is critical for democracy, so the current rise in polarisation and, disinformation directly threatens the viability of democracy. Particularly because digital platforms effectively sell the use of polarisation and disinformation tools they create to any one globally willing to pay.

It may seem difficult to relate these social threats to COP26, but its root is very similar to that of inaction on climate change. Our economies aren't just exploiting resources and people's labour in far-flung places, they are exploiting our attentions here and now. People don't pay for the digital services they provide, because they are themselves the products and advertisers are the customers. Just like with climate change, challenging this status quo means intervening in our economy, using regulation and taxation. But that requires moral imperatives like human rights, freedom of thought and democracy to be put before the capitalist imperative for economic growth.

So the challenge is reshaping our priorities and our economy. That means asking the right questions. The interventions that could do this reshaping are widely known. Green House has set out the [Social and Environmental Requirements of our economy](#), a [toolkit of interventions in our economies](#) assembled to equip citizens and politicians with a systems level understanding of what's needed. There are [proposals to Restrict Manipulative Advertising, regulate digital technology](#) and proposals to [ban surveillance advertising](#) (i.e. restrict either collection of data or targeting of advertising). What's needed is political will.

COP26 is now three weeks away. Maybe it will succeed, at least on its own terms. Perhaps in the last few weeks the 80+ countries that have not submitted more ambitious emission reduction pledges will do so, and that will represent a step change in ambition overall. Perhaps

an agreement will be reached to address the gulf between national pledges and global targets. Even so, unless there is a step change in the understanding and priorities of the majority of nations, even this hopeful outcome seems woefully insufficient relative to the joint threat that climate change and biodiversity collapse present.

For COP26 to be sufficient, it must learn the lessons of the past about what works, and what doesn't. The 1987 agreement signed in Montreal to protect the ozone layer has proved very effective in limiting the release of pollutants that stop the atmosphere absorbing harmful UV radiation. The [Montreal protocol](#) had one significant aspect which the climate agreements to date do not have. It included [provisions for enforcing limits on ozone harming pollution through trade sanctions](#). This was not some radical exception. In all societies it is well recognised that as well as agreements or laws that limit activities which are harmful to the majority, there needs to be an enforcement mechanism to ensure those laws are meaningful. Most societies don't just outlaw murder and rely on peer pressure from the majority to deter the minority. They enforce such rules through their criminal justice system. For global climate agreements to be sufficient, they too need an enforcement mechanism. [Trade sanctions are a well-established mechanism](#) for providing economic incentive for all countries to fall into line and should be on the agenda for COP26.

This is not the case, and recent UK trade deals make clear that currently ['climate' is an optional extra](#) to be dropped in order to secure economic objectives. Once again we're back where we started, growing economies is still treated as being more important than limiting climate change and avoiding biodiversity collapse. Nowhere is this more stark than in the UK with its current aviation strategy and airport expansion plans. Whilst the UK government is hosting COP26 and [calling for more ambition from other countries](#), it is allowing airports to expand and planning for aviation growth, denying the need for short-term reduction in emissions. Aviation can't be decarbonised in the near future with current technologies, so the only way to reduce aviation emissions in the short-term is to have less aircraft in the sky. Yet, in spite of 2015 Paris Accord, the UK government is allowing the [expansion of Heathrow without it being assessed against 1.5C climate target](#).

Even the objective of raising a \$100bn climate fund which is on the agenda for COP26 is being undermined by the UK saying that it's contribution will come from funds re-allocated from within the existing 'aid' budget, [which has just been reduced](#). If the premise of this climate finance is that rich countries (which are responsible for most greenhouse gas emissions to date) pay into it, and countries who've done little to cause climate change but are most at risk from consequences receive funding, then it's only fair that such funding should be additional, to address the existing imbalance. This is indeed what was actually agreed in the Paris Agreement in 2015. It has been suggested that it should also be in the form of grants (as opposed to loans) and that recipients should get to decide how it is spent. It's important to remember that it's the [economic injustice that has led to global inequality](#) that necessitates these funds in the first place.

That brings us full circle back to the root of all these issues. It is the structure and current purpose of our economies, including global trading relationships, combined with how our societies measure progress that remain the key blocker to progress at COP26. This is despite the mantra of 'economic growth above all else' looking less and less tenable let alone desirable.

The decades for incremental change are now in the distant past. COP26 is still an opportunity to change direction. To be a turning point even. However to realise that, the world needs the right issues at the top of the agenda, otherwise it will still be [asking the wrong questions](#). We must not place false hope in COP26 delivering what is not even on the agenda, but instead pressure our governments and politicians to revise their priorities. Only if our representatives go into the negotiations with the right mind-set will there be the political space for the agreement the world needs.