

Climate Change - governance

Risk expert

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The challenge of climate change has been defined as a ‘super-wicked’ problem. It is intricately linked to everything else – energy, land use, food, water, transportation, trade, development, housing, investment, security, etc. Solving it requires tremendous, unprecedented collective action by countries with very heterogeneous interests, priorities and circumstances, where powerful forces pushing for environmentally destructive development have prevailed thus far. The sharing of responsibility in mitigating climate change has thus been a central challenge in international negotiations.

The Paris Climate Agreement, signed in 2015 and in force since November 2016, avoids the critical issues of the allocation of responsibilities for safeguarding the climate and fairness of each country’s mitigation efforts. In addition, it fails to include legal obligations determining concrete mitigation actions; means for coordinating the countries’ contributions; solid mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of national pledges; and tools to punish the parties that do not comply with its provisions. Moreover, the rules established for operationalizing the agreement provide very few obligations for countries to implement ambitious climate action at the domestic level.

The 26th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which took place in Glasgow in 2021, was expected to deliver on a number of critical outcomes, namely limiting global temperature rise, mobilising increased climate finance and establishing rules for a credible global carbon market. While progress was made in several areas, the world is still far from the action needed to safeguard the Earth’s climate. The meeting was unable to put the world on track for the 1.5°C temperature global. The Glasgow decision thus urges parties to the Convention to revisit and strengthen their 2030 targets by the end of this year, so that they match the temperature goals of the Paris Agreement. It also calls on those that have not yet submitted a long-term strategy for 2050 to do so.

Financing pledges by rich nations also fell short. In 2009, developed countries had committed to mobilize USD 100 billion a year by 2020 to assist the mitigation efforts of developing countries; yet, at COP26, they declared that they would not



meet that goal until 2023. A process to develop a new, larger finance target to take effect after 2025 was agreed.

Following COP27, commentators noted that commitments regarding limiting temperatures to 1.5 degrees celsius have not progressed since COP26 and that the language about the need to phase out fossil fuels is weak. However, one success came from the historic 'loss and damage' fund to compensate for climate impact in poorer, low-emission nations.

Regarding carbon markets, parties came to an agreement on the need to avoid double-counting (that is, a situation in which both the country selling and buying carbon credits claim the same carbon emission reduction or removal).

However, they also agreed to allow the carry-over of emissions reductions from the Kyoto Protocol to help them comply with commitments made under the Paris Agreement which, in the absence of stringent rules to ensure that older credits represent real emissions, might compromise the integrity of carbon markets. On a more positive note, there was, for the first time, an unequivocal call to phase down coal and fossil fuel subsidies.

Outside formal negotiations, countries made collective commitments to halt and reverse forest loss; curb methane emissions; phase out domestic coal; end new licensing rounds for hydrocarbon exploration and production; redirect investments in unabated fossil fuels towards clean energy; put financial institutions on track to help transform the economy to net zero; create early markets for emerging green technologies, among others. It is critical, nevertheless, to move from rhetorical commitments to concrete action on the ground. The failed history of three decades of international efforts to prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system raises significant doubts on the capacity of states to deliver on their promises.

It appears unlikely that the international community will be able to prevent global warming from exceeding 1.5°C. In this context, we need to prepare for dealing with the consequences of an increasingly unstable ecological environment and mitigating the risk of a climate catastrophe. There are, however, a number of limitations and obstacles that challenge our ability to do so. The next paragraphs highlight some of them.

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In addition, our political-legal system was developed to address structured, short-term, direct cause and effect issues (the exact opposite of the climate issue); our institutions provide simple solutions with immediate effects. Moreover, managing catastrophic risks requires proactivity to anticipate emerging threats, mobilize support for action against possible future harm and provide responses that are sufficiently correct the first time, as those risks offer little or no opportunity for learning from experience and revising policies. Nevertheless, in addition to the fact that few existing institutions are capable of acting in this manner, there is



the risk that such a proactive approach translates into oppressive behaviours and security measures.

The second is the possibility of creating a new risk through efforts to prevent another (e.g., large-scale deployment of bioenergy with carbon capture and storage to help preventing catastrophic climate change, which would erode natural habitats and cause the loss of biodiversity, thus increasing the risk of ecological collapse).

Third, mitigating the risk of a climate catastrophe requires that current generations resist short-term individual benefits with the aim of improving the far future of human civilization. Many people lack motivation to help the far future.

Fourth, there tends to be a general distrust in human agency in the face of high-magnitude situations that demobilizes people. In addition, people tend to experience strong, mobilizing feelings about recent, visible events, and develop feelings of compassion especially when a subject is given a face – as societies are only beginning to experience global climate catastrophe and nature is a vast and blurred subject, public and political concern for that possibility remains low.

Finally, averting a global climate catastrophe requires deep levels of global cooperation. Global cooperation is, nevertheless, currently facing enormous challenges. Although there is a chance that the war in Ukraine will prompt a long-term shift towards sustainability as a strategy to free Western countries from their energy dependence on Russia, the tense international environment triggered by the conflict might complicate climate negotiations.

More research is needed to increase our understanding of catastrophic climate risk, better reach the public and pressure political actors to act.

In spite of the devastating fires, storms, social protests and climate strikes that swept the world in 2019, the last Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change ended in failure. Countries such as Brazil, Australia and Saudi Arabia, '[i]nvigorated by the US withdrawal from the Paris agreement and rising nationalism at home (...) defended loopholes and opposed commitments to enhance climate action'. The fact that the US re-joined the Paris Climate Agreement in 2021, and the new climate targets and commitments announced during the Leaders' Summit on Climate convened by President Joe Biden in April, brought new hope that catastrophic climate change might be avoided and helped build momentum for the decisive COP26, which will take place in November this year. Nevertheless, the world is still far from the level of ambition required to ensure a safe climate. Additionally, '[c]ommitting to intentions, targets and promises can no longer be enough. (...)[; we need to focus on] concrete results (...)[. We need a] "climate accountability summit", where showcasing results towards fulfilling the Paris Agreement are centre stage'. Yet accountability is a sensitive issue.

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