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COP26, Africa and the Glasgow Climate Pact

A Post Conference Reflection Paper
for Africa by

ONIGBANJO A., OHANYIDO F.,
OHANYIDO P.,

West African Institute of Public Health



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Contact email:

aonigbanjo@publichealth-edu.org

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The 26th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place from the 31st October to 12th November in Glasgow ¹and the key global agreements constituting what is now called “the Glasgow Climate Pact (GCP)”², fell short of some expectations, but contained several consequential new elements for the global climate agenda that will surely have great impact on Africa. There is all likelihood that such an impact on African countries is going to be catalytic on several fronts like the accelerated climate adaptation finance, the emplacement of new rules for the global carbon market and then the phasing down of some kinds of fossil fuels.

The GCP was a product of intensive discussions no holds barred discussions and associated negotiations on how countries irrespective of whether they are located on the globe can contribute to decreasing the effects of climate change. This has always been seen as the grundnorm of climate change action. This is in line the watchtower call of Goal 13 of the Sustainable Development Agenda that harps on the urgent need for action to combat climate change and its impacts which are clearly linked to the other Goals of the 2030 Agenda. Collective action seats squarely at the heart of implementing the GCP as this is fundamental to the improvement of human life as climate change is becoming more detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the human race and the planet in general. It is therefore not surprising that many of the participants at the conference considered climate change the biggest risk the world is currently facing. This may be related to the increased advocacy, diplomacy and evidence on all fronts, but more so because over the last two decades more of the physical evidence are now staring at the world in the face, such as storms, floods and wildfires and so forth. These are not only becoming more recurrent, but are intensifying.

Then again, it was not all ayes, as there are groups that feel that if the world is to be able to reduce the worst impacts of climate change as aimed by the GCP, it needs to go further than the current content of the GCP. This pro ‘more intervention’ group includes climate change activists as well as some notable world leaders such as Boris Johnson.³ Still, there are other climate change actors that are skeptical of agreements like the GCP that is not legally binding. Nonetheless, there is a general sense that the GCP will help set the scene for the key climate change efforts for the next few years like the Paris conference of 2015, which is not an unusual post-COP sentiment. For an expert like Piers Forster, Professor of Physical Climate Change & Director of the Priestley International Centre for Climate University of Leeds, the GCP is not perfect, but incrementally gives strength to Paris agreement as well as delivers a strong

¹ Glasgow Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 26) <https://sdg.iisd.org/events/2020-un-climate-change-co...>

² The Glasgow Climate Pact (GCP) https://www.europarl.europa.eu/P-9-2021-005208_EN

³ Watered-down wording for coal in COP26 deal doesn't ... - ITV <https://www.itv.com/news/diluted-language-for-coal...>

framework for the world to track commitments against real-world progress over the next years.⁴

It can be argued that despite all the bad news related to climate change, there have been some good news. For example, even though air pollution is affecting the health of tens of millions of people in different parts of the globe, advances made in tackling climate change are leading to cleaner air, creating jobs and restoring nature. However, for many African countries like those in the Sahel region that have seen worsening food insecurity from famine due to increasing desertification and worsening heat and drought, which have worsened the circumstances of the area and left the region the tinderbox of war and insurgency.

In the whole climate change conversation, Africa's key strategic importance lies with its fossil fuels, mineral wealth and critical geopolitical positioning as it boasts of high renewable energy potential. It is a bit early to gauge the level of commitment on the part of African leaders, the African Union and their strategic posture towards following through with the GCP. Several African leaders were present at the conference which had West African Heads of States like Muhammadu Buhari (Nigeria), Mohamed Bazoum (Niger), Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé (Togo), Umaro Sissoco Embaló (Guinea-Bissau), Julius Maada Bio (Sierra Leone), George Weah (Liberia). Other West African leaders sent in environmental ministers as their representatives, they include Alassane Ouattara (Côte d'Ivoire), Roch Marc Christian Kaboré (Burkina Faso), and Patrice Talon (Benin)⁵. One can argue that having African leaders there showed that Africa, which is mostly affected by the effects of climate change is aware and working to prevent further contribution on its own part as well as to explore ways that it can implement changes for the future.

At the session focused on *Africa's adaptation*, The Democratic Republic of Congo's President, Felix Tshisekedi said that "The world promised \$100 billion. The world promised more money for adaptation. The world needs to keep its promises"⁶. Africa contributes the least to climate change but suffering the impact the most. This in itself maybe the signal that African leaders are now speaking up and asking the Western countries to keep their promises to clear the green debt. While some observers say the COP26 agreement represented the "start of a breakthrough", some African and Latin American countries, like Tshisekedi of Congo felt not enough progress was made especially looking back to the experiences of the past.

⁴ Climate Change Causes https://ec.europa.eu/clima/climate-change/causes-climate-change_en

⁵ <https://www.theafricareport.com/140935/africa-who-will-be-attending-cop26/>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/keep-your-promises-climate-finance-african-leaders-tell-west-2021-11-02/>

True to pattern, COP26 had commenced with a critical review of its predecessors, especially The Paris Agreement of 2015 which was a watershed document that came at the beginning of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) at a time the world was ushering in the SDGs. It had x-rayed how the world had fared towards achieving that agreement, which had gotten the world to work at keeping temperature rises within 1.5° C by the year 2030 which is fast closing in. The shortcomings of the past years were identified and discussed. More ways to tackle climate change in every country were also explored. Some of the major shortcomings identified include financing gaps and activities that are still harming the environment and so forth. An important note is the fact that the conference established that United Kingdom is a leading country in tackling climate change from reducing the number of gas cars on the road to electric cars, encouraging the use of bicycles for transport, creating transport systems to reduce the number of cars on the road and encouraging green environment. In terms of organisation of the event, the hybrid nature as occasioned by the pandemic made it more inclusive, as it engaged more people globally across the rather wide range of topics discussed.

Taking a step back to reflect on the objectives of COP 26 may help build a better picture about the outcome. The objectives of COP26 can be categorised into four parts; the first objective being to secure global net-zero by mid-century and keep 1.5°C temperature rise within reach, countries were asked to come up with achievable ways to reach emissions reduction targets by 2030 that aligns with reaching global net zero by middle of the century. Second objective was to protect communities and natural habitats by working together to encourage countries affected by climate change to protect and restore ecosystems, build defenses and make infrastructure more resilient to avoid loss of lives. Third objective was to mobilise finance to achieve the goals of reducing emissions, while the last objective was to work together to deliver on the Paris agreement.⁷ Thus, looking at the outcomes of the Conference, especially as it pertains to areas that should be of great interest to Africa, the agreements around coal, emissions and finance for developing countries feature most prominently.

In the case of coal, it was one of the most significant outcomes of COP26, being backed by an action plan to reduce the use of coal that is believed to cause about 40% global annual CO₂ emissions and sadly, the wording was changed from “phase out” to “phase down” thereby watering down this aspect of the agreement. In the case of emissions, the Pact admits that there is no safe threshold for global warming as it resolves to limit global warming to 1.5°C, which is different from the Paris text of “well below 2°C to prevent climate catastrophe. The pact also attempted to tackle the financial gap for developing countries, many of which are in sub-Saharan Africa, by pledging to significantly increase monies to cushion the effects for

⁷ COP26 Explained <https://ukcop26.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/COP26-Explained.pdf>

them as they make the transition, coupled with the possibility of a trillion a year climate fund that may be emplaced by 2025 to accelerate the needed transitions.

It is significant that the US and China announced their pledge to boost climate cooperation by collaborating on issues like methane emissions, transitioning to clean energy and decarbonization and Africa's voice was not drowned in these efforts as President Muhammadu Buhari had signaled that Nigeria will cut its emissions to net zero by 2060. Leaders from over 100 countries had promised to stop deforestation by 2030 and there is a planned scheme to cut the methane emissions by 30% as well as the fact that about 450 financial organizations have agreed to back technology renewable energy and financing away from fossil fuels. Following through with all these agreements made will help in achieving the Paris agreement of securing a global net-zero emissions and keeping a 1.5°C temperature rise globally.⁸

For Africa, looking back to Paris and now the GCP the agreement is not without its own conundrum as it further highlights the attendant dilemma of its energy economics. This is because the risk of what is known as “stranded assets” have piqued a lot of interest as the world harps on the need for quick transition to low-carbon pathways. This move was further strengthened by the fact that 185 countries have agreed to leave two-thirds of proven fossil fuels in the ground. For clarity, the premature or unanticipated or stoppage of exploration including the devaluation and write-downs or even conversion to liabilities such natural resources, like minerals prior to exploration with chance of market collapse has been referred to as Stranded Asset.

For the African continent the high risk of stranded assets constitute a major policy issue because it is still heavily dependent on various forms of natural resources, with the International Energy Agency(IEA) warning that oil and gas assets worth \$1.3 trillion could become stranded assets by mid-century.⁹ This is of course a major concern for Africa which the African Development Bank (AfDB) projects that about 90% of the member countries are dependent on primary commodities.¹⁰ Many nations on the continent that are key players in the world energy market, choosing sustainable energy sources over fossil fuels will stimulate new industries, create new jobs and shore up economic growth alongside social and health benefits for their people. However, it is also worthy of note that Africa's growing weight is also felt in natural gas markets as the continent becomes the third-largest source of global gas as that sector grows with increasing demands over the next century.

⁸ COP26. What are the on the Last Days of the Climate Conference <https://www.scotsman.com/news/environment/cop26-what-are-the-cop26-outcomes-on-the-last-day-of-the-climate-conference-3456222>

⁹ [IEA warns \\$1.3 trillion of oil and gas could be left stranded https://carbontracker.org](https://carbontracker.org) > [iea-warns-1-3-trillion-of-oil-...](https://carbontracker.org)

¹⁰ [Can Africa Afford to 'Strand' its Fossil Fuels? - African ... https://www.afdb.org](https://www.afdb.org) > news-and-events > can-africa-af...

With the GCP here, what can Africa consider as some of the key take away as it heads towards implementation? Is Africa ready to ride on the GCP to help catalyse a long-term strategy for the future?

The list here is of the twelve (12) key take away as agreed by both the West African Institute of Public Health and the United Nations SDGs Professional Support Group for Africa are as follows;

- 1) *COP26 may be the death knell for climate change denial within multilateral frameworks. There is now global consensus on the fact that climate change is a planet-threatening issue.*
- 2) Countries committed to the COP26 Health Programme as WHO established the **COP26 Health Programme** to bring a stronger health focus and ambition to COP26 which is a signal for Africa to commit more for health.
- 3) It is time for the world to phase down fossil fuels and Africa needs to plan to do so and have a clear roadmap for possibility of stranded assets¹¹
- 4) *COP26 will bring financing for transition and Africa needs to clearly verify cop26 commitments and plan ahead for financing*
- 5) *Strengthened global carbon offset markets from COP26 will provide leverage advantage for Africa to key into*
- 6) COP26 had **declaration on deforestation, but it isn't binding.**¹²
- 7) COP26 gave more attention than ever to transportation, with greater boost for electric vehicles
- 8) COP26 gave significant emphasis on the built environment on the agenda and resulted with national and global plans
- 9) COP26 grappled with energy transitions as many technologies discussed are still young and transition to renewable energy will not be cheap. A mix of innovations seems to be the direction¹³
- 10) In terms of Science and innovation at COP26, new initiatives like Low-carbon steel, concrete and next generation biofuels were given strong highlights
- 11) COP26 still showed some slow progress with gender equality as it started late in the COP workstreams a few years ago. This is particularly important in Africa as women are at the center of significant changes resulting from climate change¹⁴
- 12) *Towards a fruitful COP27, Africa needs to plan, prioritize and give voice to the major issues.*

¹¹ <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/can-africa-afford-strand-its-fossil-fuels-30276>

¹² <https://www.wri.org/insights/what-cop26-means-forests-climate>

¹³ <https://unfccc.int/news/innovative-technology-key-to-climate-action>

¹⁴ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/11/1105322>