



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Mind the Gap: Success at COP26

PHIL MCNALLY
TIM LORD

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Introduction

COP26, to be held this November in Glasgow, is the most important meeting on climate since the Paris Agreement of 2015. Indeed, some – including Alok Sharma, the man charged with delivering a successful summit outcome – argue that it is the world’s last chance to keep climate change in check.¹ And while that may be too stark an assessment, there is no doubt that success at COP26 will put the world in a much better position to tackle the increasingly urgent threat of climate change. Failure, on the other hand, could be a disastrous setback, from both a global and UK perspective.

The timing could not be more crucial. We no longer need to rely on scientific projections to tell us that the climate is changing. We can see it with our own eyes.

The Earth’s atmosphere is trapping twice as much heat as it did in 2005² and the impact of this is already affecting millions of people around the world. In 2020 alone, Australian bushfires scorched 11 million hectares of land and caused hundreds of deaths; in California, 9,200 fires burned millions of hectares, turning the golden state black; across Africa, hundreds of thousands were displaced by devastating floods while record-setting locust swarms destroyed crops and threatened food security. And we are witnessing more of the same in 2021: in late June, North America experienced a supposedly 1-in-10,000-year heatwave with at least 34 people dying suddenly in Vancouver on 29 June as temperatures soared to 47°C.³ Furthermore, the physical changes that presage escalation of climate changes are flashing red – last year, temperatures in the Arctic hit 38°C and summer sea ice levels were the second lowest on record.

All this means the urgency of coordinated global action has never been more acute. There is no question that rhetoric has ramped up in recent months, with new targets set for the UK, US, EU, Japan and others, and a widespread recognition that we face a climate emergency. But the pace of action, while accelerating, is too slow. Signatories to the Paris Agreement committed to limit warming to well below 2°C, and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5°C. But since 2015, emissions have continued to increase and the remaining carbon budget for 1.5°C is quickly running out.⁴ Ambition levels are too low to keep the target in reach and the national commitments that do exist are not backed up by credible plans.

The developed world’s failure to back up rhetoric and targets with action is not limited to its own emissions. The assistance promised to those least responsible for climate change, and most vulnerable to it, has not been forthcoming. The lowest-income nations are increasingly, and rightly, concerned that they were promised support in dealing with climate change that has not been delivered.

So, while some progress has been made, including at the G7 meeting and April’s Biden-led Leaders’ Summit on Climate, the prospects for success at COP26 hang in the balance. While a successful

outcome is within reach, failure on the scale of Copenhagen in 2009 – an outcome that set climate action back by years – cannot be ruled out. Such a failure would be disastrous for the climate, and for the UK's attempt to define its post-Brexit global leadership role.

What should the UK, and the world, do to ensure success at COP26? The key challenge is to close the gap between rhetoric and action in four ways:

1. **Ambitious targets backed by delivery plans:** the last six months have seen an increase in ambition from several countries, with two-thirds⁵ of the global economy now covered by net-zero targets and a number of nations increasing the scope of their 2030 targets. But those targets – particularly for the next decade – are not yet ambitious enough, and they are not supported by delivery plans that give citizens, investors and innovators the confidence and clarity they need.
2. **A pathway for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that enables decarbonisation, resilience, energy access and economic growth:** the Paris Agreement committed high-income countries to providing \$100 billion of support per year to help fund climate resilience and adaptation in lower-income countries – an important start, but not a true reflection of the level of assistance that will be needed. Even that original commitment has not been met. At COP26, the wealthiest countries need not only to meet that target; they must set a more stretching goal to support their lower-income counterparts in establishing pathways to decarbonisation that cut emissions, enable universal energy access and strengthen economic growth.
3. **Position climate change in mainstream politics and public consciousness – nationally and internationally:** for too long, climate policy has been the preserve of environmental NGOs, climate diplomats and energy specialists. Their work in raising the level of concern and delivering international cooperation has been vital. But mainstream politicians now have the job of placing delivery of net zero at the forefront of politics – making rapid emission cuts a defining component of policy across their activities, from investment to education and health care to housing.
4. **Unleashing the power of the private sector and the state:** the urgency of climate change means we must unleash all our resources and capabilities – from the private sector and from national, regional and local governments – to meet the challenge. And in doing so, we can not only stop climate change, but we can deliver inclusive and sustained economic growth too. The development of coronavirus vaccines has shown that when private-sector innovation and ingenuity is supported and enabled by government action, positive change can happen at previously unimaginable speed. By supercharging the integration of net-zero technologies into our economies, and strengthening international collaboration, COP26 can help create irresistible momentum in the development and delivery of the technologies and behaviour changes needed to transform our chances of averting the climate emergency.

Context

Closing the Gap Between Rhetoric and Action

There is a recurring theme of overpromising and underdelivering on climate change. For decades, leaders have stated their commitment to do what is necessary to stop climate change by investing in technologies and cutting emissions, and to provide the support that low-income countries need both to decarbonise and to adapt to the impacts of climate change.

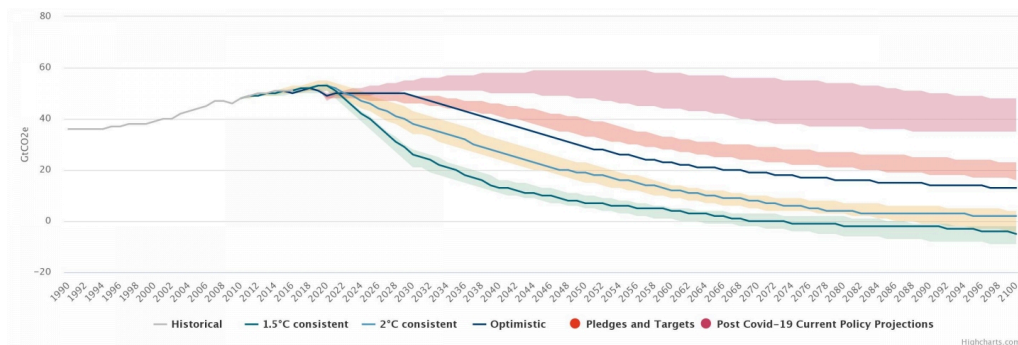
But those promises have not been matched by action. Unless addressed before and at COP26, the gap between rhetoric and action poses a potentially insurmountable challenge to global collaboration on climate change.

Mitigation – Slow Progress and Inadequate Plans

At the time of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, annual global emissions were 29.7 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (GtCO₂e) and fossil fuels provided 87 per cent of primary energy. By 2018, the equivalent figures were 48.9 GtCO₂e and 85 per cent.⁶ This has increased the urgency with which we must cut emissions – but according to current commitments, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expects annual global emissions of 59 GtCO₂e in 2030, which is consistent with a 3.5°C temperature increase by the end of the century.⁷

This would be a clear failure to meet the objectives of the Paris Agreement and would invite catastrophic impacts of climate change. To limit warming to 2°C, UNEP suggests that policies would need to be introduced to limit 2030 emissions to 41 GtCO₂e – a 31 per cent reduction against the current trajectory. To meet the target of 1.5°C, which all signatories to the Paris Agreement are committed to pursuing, emissions by 2030 would need to be capped at 25GtCO₂e, or 58 per cent below the current trajectory.

Figure 1 – Highlighting the gaps between current emissions pledges and actual warming



Source: Climate Action Tracker/Our World in Data

Resilience, Adaptation and a Failure to Support Low-Income Countries

The theme of rhetoric over reality is also manifested in the relationship between the developing and developed world. The outcome of the recent meeting of the G7 nations was disappointing. The final communique included a pledge of 1 billion coronavirus vaccines for lower-income countries, falling somewhat short of promises to “vaccinate the world”. It also lacked any clarity on the issue of increased contributions to fulfil the already overdue commitment of \$100 billion in annual climate finance to LMICs. Such issues fuel LMIC scepticism over support from the developed world, dampening their motivation to act on climate change. Indeed, this scepticism is now clearly evident as 100 developing nations recently joined ranks to condemn the slow progress from rich nations, setting out five demands ahead of COP26. Rebuilding trust between the developing and developed world must therefore be a key focus of COP26.

The developed world has paid little attention to the complexity of a just transition for LMICs to date, seemingly working on the basis that with the support of climate finance from their high-income counterparts, these countries can simply leapfrog the fossil-fuel era and enjoy carbon-neutral prosperity. But the transition requires a delicate balancing of several urgent political priorities such as providing access to electricity and clean water alongside action on climate change. Developed nations must recognise the complexity of this challenge and focus on providing meaningful support to LMICs through ambitious commitments and timely delivery.

Rhetoric is important for building a mandate on action against climate change. But there is a fine balance between articulating a brighter future and relying on empty promises. Governments around the world have been offered a certain level of patience throughout the pandemic in response to a general acceptance of the difficulties involved in dealing with such an unfamiliar foe. That same patience will not be offered in the response to climate change because the impacts have long been understood and many of the solutions already exist. The time is now for leaders to transition from rhetoric to reality – from commitments to delivery.

What Does Success at COP26 Look Like?

It is probably unrealistic to expect to see all 197 parties to the Paris Agreement submit nationally determined contributions (NDCs) compatible with 1.5°C or even 2°C at COP26, given the level of increased ambition and unanimity that would require. So, what can we expect from COP26 and what would represent a positive outcome for the UK as host?

We propose four overarching deliverables for COP26 to reignite momentum following COP25 and to set the world on track to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement:

1. Increased ambition on targets accompanied by plans for delivery.
2. A clear framework to support LMICs in the transition.
3. Position climate change in mainstream politics and public consciousness.
4. Unleash the power of the private sector and the state.

Increased Ambition on Targets Accompanied by Plans for Delivery

COP26 is significant because it is the first opportunity to review NDCs in the five-year cycle. It is therefore critical that the UK uses the opportunity to negotiate increased ambition from all parties to close the emissions gap highlighted (Figure 1). The UK must also seek detailed delivery plans from parties to legitimise this increased ambition and provide benchmarks against which progress can be measured at future COPs.

The immediate priority is for those countries and companies most responsible for climate change, both historically and today, to set more ambitious targets supported by credible delivery plans that reduce emissions from today. To provide context, the US has contributed roughly 25 per cent of historical CO₂ emissions whereas Africa is responsible for only 3 per cent (Figure 2). In 2018, despite having similar populations, China contributed 24 per cent of annual emissions with only 9 per cent from Africa. This global imbalance must be addressed, with **big emitters taking responsibility** for their contribution to climate change by submitting 2030 NDCs that are aligned with the Paris Agreement and contain detailed plans to deliver the pledged reduction in emissions.

To achieve this, it is vital that **the UK is negotiating from a position of strength**. The minimum requirement is to lead by example – if the UK is asking others to submit ambitious targets and delivery plans, then it must provide credible examples in return. The first stage of this is already complete; the UK was the first major economy in the world to legislate for net-zero emissions by 2050 and has

subsequently added 2030 and 2035 targets that are compatible with this goal. The next step is a detailed delivery plan, which we hope to see in the net-zero strategy document due to be published by the government in September. We set out the 11 questions the strategy must answer [here](#). This is a key opportunity for the UK to establish credibility as a leader on climate change and strengthen the post-Brexit vision of a global Britain.

Another key element of a strong UK negotiating position is **trust**. One of the key elements of success at COP21 was the fact that French delegates were viewed as trustworthy negotiators. The UK must earn the trust of parties by leading by example, as per the above, but honesty and empathy must also be displayed. The climate emergency is the greatest collective challenge that humanity has ever faced, and the burden of change and impacts will disproportionately fall on the developing world. The UK must listen to the concerns and challenges faced by other nations and provide support in overcoming them. The “confessionals” at COP21 – where delegates could express concerns confidentially to French diplomats with an assurance of privacy – were a fine example of this. But perhaps the most important means of gaining trust will be mediating a consensus between nations from the developing and developed world.

A Clear Framework to Support LMICs in the Transition

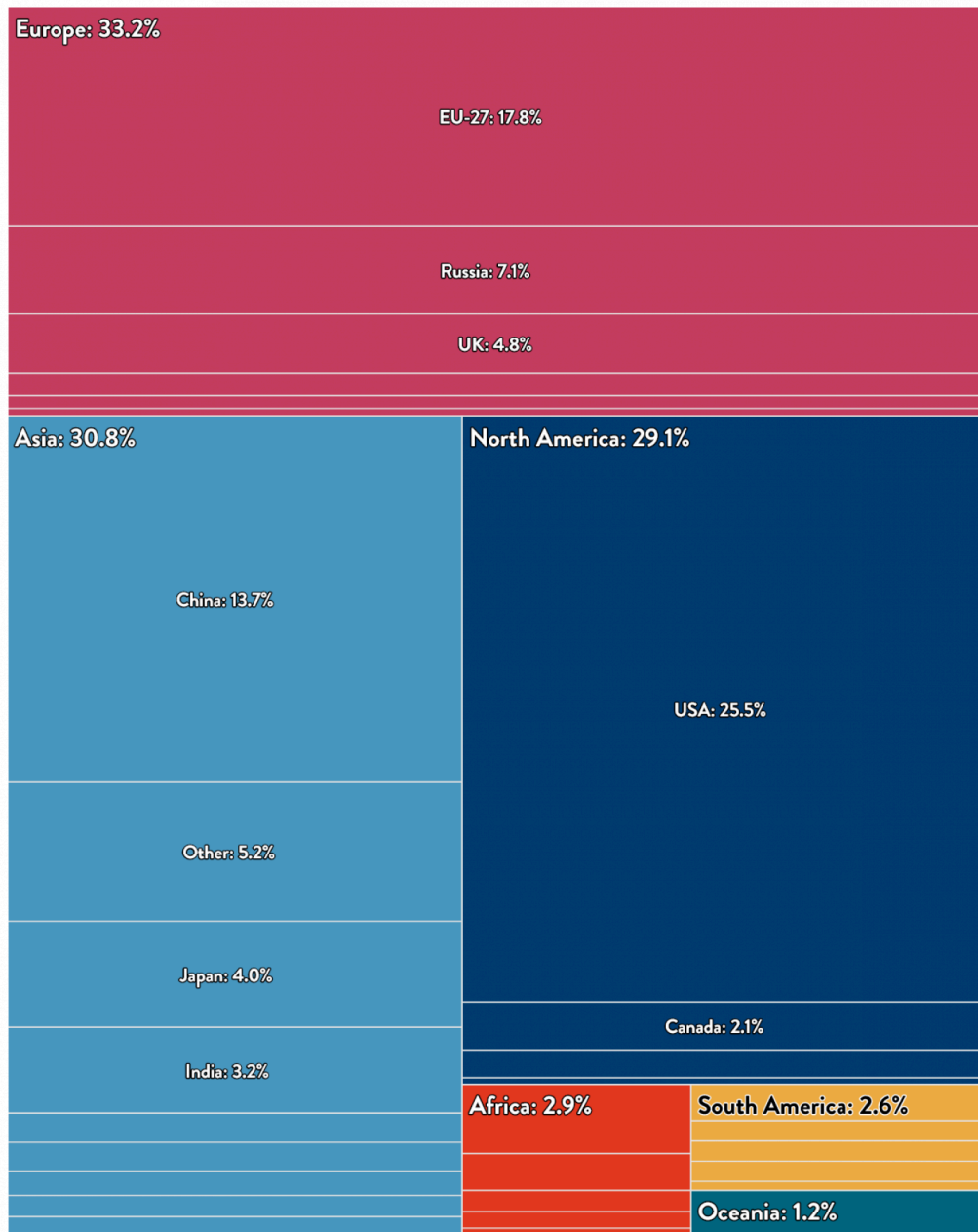
It is already a well-established fact that the entire world needs to decarbonise by mid-century to avoid the devastating impacts of climate change. However, there must be an acknowledgement of the unique challenges that LMICs face in this transition and an acceptance that their path to decarbonisation will look very different to that of the developed world.

Emissions in the developed world have reached a peak and are already in decline. Recent research for Carbon Brief has shown that emissions are down 15.3 per cent since 1999 with 87 per cent of that decrease a result of climate policy.⁸ Conversely, emissions in the developing world are very much on the rise as populations increase, industrialisation advances and millions move out of poverty. Emissions in Africa, for example, have risen by 92 per cent over the same period yet some 590 million Africans still live without electricity.⁹ To put the global imbalance in usage into context, the electricity consumed by UK washing machines is higher than the total annual electricity consumption of a country such as Tanzania.^{10, 11}

Clearly, **decarbonising LMICs will be the biggest challenge** in achieving net zero. While these countries face many of the same challenges as their high-income counterparts, they do so in the context of rapid economic growth and far inferior spending power. They are least responsible for climate change (see Figure 2), currently ill-equipped to respond and will suffer the most severe impacts. It is in the interest of the developed world to support LMICs in decoupling emissions from economic growth, not only from a

moral perspective, but also because the impacts of climate change will continue to be felt the world over until global carbon neutrality is reached.

Figure 2 – Contributors to climate change measured cumulatively from 1751–2017



Source: UNEP

It is, of course, out of the question to ask the developing world to constrain growth and delay improving the quality of life that every citizen deserves. Focus must therefore be on pursuing the most sustainable means of industrialisation and providing access to electricity for the 800 million people around the world without it. There is cause for optimism – recent research has shown that between 2005 and 2019, 32 countries have experienced GDP growth while reducing both territorial and consumption emissions.¹²

The UK is a prime example of this phenomenon with a 43 per cent reduction in emissions accompanying 75 per cent GDP growth since 1990.¹³ The notion that economic growth and GHG emissions are inextricably linked has been consigned to history. The UK must use COP26 to improve relations between the developing and developed world and set a framework for sincere collaboration in driving sustainable growth in LMICs.

Success at COP26 requires the establishment of a reliable and consistent framework of support for LMICs. At the United Nations in 2009, high-income countries agreed that, from 2020, they would jointly contribute \$100 billion in public and private **climate finance** to help lower-income nations tackle climate change. The lack of a clear reporting structure means that it is unclear how much has been contributed to date, but the consensus is that high-income countries have fallen somewhat short of the commitment. The fact that we cannot even say for sure puts into question the sincerity of the pledge, further damages trust between the developing and developed world, and could singlehandedly derail COP26 negotiations.

The UK must renew the \$100 billion commitment through the introduction of a clear framework for the calculation, hypothecation and reporting of contributions as well as a mechanism for covering any shortfalls. As acknowledged by the COP26 president, the developed world must deliver and move beyond the \$100 billion commitment¹⁴ – Lord Nicholas Stern has suggested that developed nations use COP26 to agree a \$150 billion annual contribution by 2025.¹⁵ On top of increasing these commitments in relation to the level of support, the framework should dictate that the finance is in addition to pre-existing official development assistance (ODA) to avoid double counting. It should also provide clarity on the targeting of climate finance to assess a) whether it bridges the gap between a minimum-cost option and a lower-carbon option, and b) the marginal benefits of the investment from a global perspective, to ensure that climate finance is delivering efficiently.

A sensible COP26 approach for the UK would be to identify and drive progress in areas where it is well-qualified to advise. A strong history in private and public financing should be harnessed to drive collaboration to design mechanisms that unlock international investment. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has previously seen glacial progress on the issues of carbon markets, border taxes and carbon prices, but there is a real opportunity for the UK to catalyse a breakthrough in these areas. Progress on climate finance is a key deliverable of COP26.

The UNFCCC states that “all Parties shall promote and cooperate in the development and transfer of technologies that reduce emissions of GHGs.” The development of low-carbon energy technologies is not yet at a point where LMICs can be expected to grow without some reliance on fossil fuels. Rapidly falling costs of technologies such as solar PV (solar photovoltaics), wind power and battery storage provide long-term confidence on sustainable growth, but alternatives will be required in the interim. There is a key role here for developed countries to work with LMICs to promote, facilitate and finance

the **transfer of low-carbon technologies** such as renewables and carbon capture, usage and storage (CCUS) to minimise near-term reliance on the unabated use of fossil fuels.

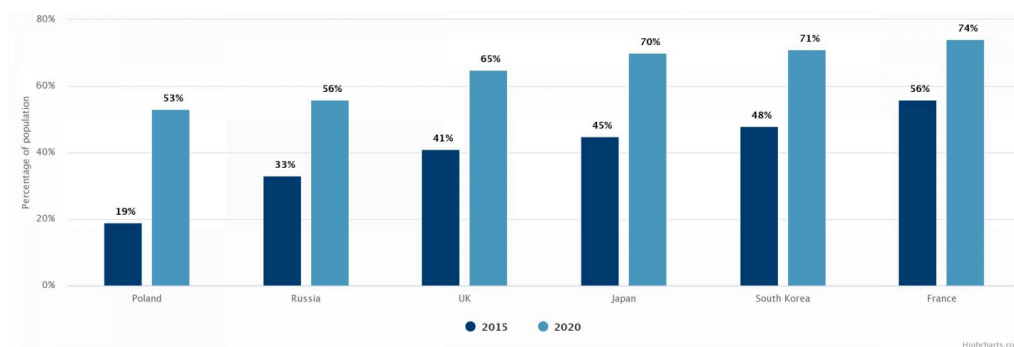
Several developed nations have seen deep emission cuts in recent years and have thus gained valuable skills and experience that can be shared with LMICs. The UK, for example, has seen rapid growth in renewable technologies, is leading on the development of regulatory and commercial frameworks for technologies such as CCUS, and is grappling with the challenge of keeping the lights on while overhauling electricity supply. As the world decarbonises, these technologies and skills will be required everywhere. The developed world has a responsibility, and an inherent interest, in developing a framework to facilitate the **transfer of these skills** and to drive accelerated decarbonisation across the globe. Such a framework should ensure that any such transfer of skills is better aligned with development objectives and the needs of different countries.

The Institute has a long history of working with African governments on sustainable development and energy access and will soon publish a paper on what a just transition for Africa might look like.

Position Climate Change in Mainstream Politics and Public Consciousness

Climate change concern is on the rise around the world. The proportion of the UK population that see it as a very serious problem has risen from 41 per cent in 2015 to 65 per cent in 2020 – and it is a similar story in other developed countries (Figure 3). We also see high levels of concern across the globe with 61 per cent recognising the climate emergency in sub-Saharan Africa and 63 per cent in Asia-Pacific.¹⁶

Figure 3 – Rising share of populations that perceive climate change as a serious problem



Source: TBI using Pew data¹⁷

This makes for positive reading but there is still work to be done to inform the few billion people around the world who are unaware of the severity of climate change. COP26 can help with this. The UK can use the opportunity to agree a narrative on climate change so that leaders around the world are **making the positive case for climate action**. A joint declaration of a climate emergency from leaders – backed by

action that shows this is not just rhetoric – could also draw attention and increase cooperation if backed by meaningful action.

Leaders must be careful, however, to avoid focusing solely on the threats of climate change. Communication to date has typically been characterised by negative emotional appeals, particularly to people’s fear response. Yet research has long shown that fear appeals can be counterproductive, inducing behaviours such as denial and hopelessness. Positive emotional appeals have been shown to produce more affirmative attitudes towards climate change and increase awareness of its severity.¹⁸ COP26 should therefore see leaders balance their communication on climate change in favour of articulating benefits and opportunities while remaining clear on the risks.

“Our new world of short-term technological and environmental change requires a new mind capable of perceiving long-term, slow-motion calamity,” say authors Robert Ornstein and Paul Ehrlich in *New World, New Mind*.¹⁹ People are prone to temporal discounting – the natural tendency to overvalue benefits in the short-term relative to benefits in the long-term. This behaviour is most evident in politics where actors are constantly focused on the near-term decisions and actions that will keep them in favour in the upcoming round of elections. It is also typically very difficult, if not impossible, for politicians to push through groundbreaking new policies unless in response to an immediate crisis. Of course, this pattern is completely at odds with the long-term impacts that climate change will have on current and future generations – so how can we overcome **short-termism in politics** and what role can COP26 play?

Embedding climate change into politics requires accurate pricing of the risks and opportunities at all levels of government decision-making. The UK is currently exploring such a framework through the recent HM Treasury [Green Book Review](#) and the ongoing [Net Zero Review](#). The Welsh Wellbeing of Future Generations Act provides an example of legislation that can support such governance. The act requires all public bodies to demonstrate they are taking decisions in a way that meets today’s needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. Governance such as this is an area of strength for the UK, which can be harnessed to advise others at COP26 to instil deeper consideration of climate impacts in decision-making.

Unleash the Power of the Private Sector and the State

The private and public sectors have unique strengths and weaknesses, and the scale and pace of the climate emergency can only be met by unleashing the strengths of both. While the public sector is unable to drive innovation and efficiencies like the private sector, it still has a key role in addressing market failures and designing a regulatory and policy framework to deliver desired outcomes. Bringing together the power of both is therefore crucial to the efficient delivery of the Paris Agreement.

Many refer to the transition to global net zero as the fourth industrial revolution given the technological transformation required. **Innovation and technology** must therefore be placed at the heart of the transition and the public and private sectors must work together to accelerate progress on the development of new low-carbon technologies. The response to the coronavirus pandemic saw innovation occur at an unprecedented rate, with the state acting as an enabler of the rapid development and rollout of vaccines. We set out the crucial lessons drawn from the pandemic response that can equally drive innovation on climate change [here](#).

Carbon pricing and international carbon markets are fundamental to addressing the negative externality of GHG emissions and incentivising the uptake of low-carbon technologies by putting a price on carbon. However, these instruments are politically challenging to introduce given the reliance of the global economy on carbon and international disparities. The current average carbon price in the global economy is estimated at just \$2 per tonne of CO₂ (/tCO₂), ²⁰ yet a study commissioned at COP22 found that carbon prices should rise to between \$50 and \$100/tCO₂ to meet the Paris Agreement targets cost-effectively. ²¹ Collaboration between the public and private sectors is crucial to the politically feasible implementation of carbon pricing and markets. The UK has a strong track record and should utilise COP26 to accelerate action in these areas.

Beyond Glasgow

COP26 is a pivotal moment in the fight against climate change. Recent years have seen a welcome step change in global ambition but unless meaningful action soon follows, the goals of the Paris Agreement will be out of reach. Over the past 16 months, much of the world's attention has been diverted to tackling coronavirus and there is still much to do to before life can continue as normal. There is, therefore, a real risk of failure at COP26 given the high stakes and circumstances but such an outcome is not inevitable. The conference will not in itself solve climate change; it can arguably still be a success even if all parties are not perfectly aligned with the targets of the Paris Agreement. But there does need to be significant progress in the areas covered by this paper to reignite momentum and set the foundation for meaningful action through the 2020s.

COP26 presents a rare opportunity for the UK to establish itself as a genuine leader on climate change and demonstrate that Britain is truly global and green. A successful conference will provide the Conservative government with the impetus to press ahead with a green recovery from the pandemic and capitalise on the associated domestic and international opportunities. Displaying leadership by turning recent rhetoric into pioneering action is crucial to success at COP26 and beyond. The time for real action from the UK, and the world, is now.

Charts created with [Highcharts](#) unless otherwise credited.

Footnotes

1. ^ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cop26-president-designate-alok-sharma-pick-the-planet>
 2. ^ <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/langley/joint-nasa-noaa-study-finds-earths-energy-imbalance-has-doubled>
 3. ^ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/06/29/canada-heatwave-residents-forced-cool-amazon-warehouse-sleep/>
 4. ^ Carbon budget refers to the estimate of CO₂-equivalent emissions permitted to contain warming to this level.
 5. ^ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-03-23-net-zero-pledges-go-global-now-action-needs-follow-words-oxford-eciu-report>
 6. ^ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/fossil-fuels-share-energy?tab=chart>
 7. ^ Emissions Gap Report 2020, UNEP DTU Partnership
 8. ^ <https://www.carbonbrief.org/guest-post-g7-climate-laws-cut-emissions-by-1-3bn-tonnes-in-2019>
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 10. ^ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/928350/2020_Energy_Consumption_in_the_UK__ECUK_.pdf
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 14. ^ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cop26-president-closing-remarks-at-placencia-ambition-forum>
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18. ^ <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-22>
 19. ^ Paul Ehrlich & Robert Ornstein, *New World, New Mind* (Methuen, 1989)
 20. ^ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/leadership-carbon-pricing-2020-21>
 21. ^ *Report of the High-Level Commission on Carbon Prices* (page 10)
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