

Parliamentary briefing: Pope Francis's new call to action on the climate crisis ahead of COP28

Ahead of COP28, Pope Francis has written a new message, named [Laudate Deum](#), imploring political leaders to act with greater urgency to tackle the climate crisis.

What does Pope Francis say in *Laudate Deum*?

Time is running out to tackle the climate crisis – and the world's poorest communities are paying the price

Pope Francis warns in his message that we are approaching a “breaking point” and that “[s]ome effects of the climate crisis are already irreversible”. The Pope points out that “we barely have time to prevent even more tragic damage”, with global temperatures likely to rise beyond the critical 1.5C level in coming years without urgent and deep reductions in greenhouse gas emissions.

Francis acknowledges that the effects of the climate crisis “are borne by the most vulnerable people, whether at home or around the world”. This injustice is highlighted by the fact that the emissions of the world's richest countries and individuals dwarf those of low-income countries.

Such an injustice is evident in regions such as East Africa, where an estimated 60 million people are struggling to access food.¹ In Northern Kenya, the climate crisis has driven five failed rainy seasons, plunging communities deeper into poverty in a country where 80 per cent of people living in rural areas are employed in the agricultural sector.²

Countries at COP28 must commit to a rapid transition from fossil fuels that is binding and measurable

Pope Francis makes it clear that “the necessary transition towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar energy, and the abandonment of fossil fuels, is not progressing at the necessary speed.” The Pope insists that leaders at COP28 must agree to speed up the energy transition, and that agreements to do so be “efficient, obligatory and readily monitored”.

In making this call, the Pope warns against an overreliance on technology in the fight against the climate crisis, cautioning that an excessive dependence on technological interventions, such as carbon capture, risks “pasting and papering over cracks”.

Francis notes that the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy is “capable of generating countless jobs in different sectors”, while the continued use of fossil fuels means that “millions of people are losing their jobs” due to “rising sea levels, droughts and other phenomena”.³

Political leaders must put global common good ahead of self-interest

In *Laudate Deum*, Pope Francis repeats a previous lament that “international negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries that place their national interests above the global common good”. The Pope warns that “[t]hose who will have to suffer the consequences [...] will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility.”

Francis urges leaders at COP28 to be “strategists capable of considering the common good and the future of their children, more than the short-term interests of certain countries or businesses”. He repeats a challenge he has issued previously: “What would induce anyone, at this stage, to hold on to power, only to be remembered for their inability to take action when it was urgent and necessary to do so?”

The Holy Father notes that efforts by individuals, families and communities can all help to alleviate some suffering, and that these can help “to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society”. However, he is clear that “the most effective solutions will not come from individual efforts alone, but above all from major political decisions on the national and international level.”

What action needs to be taken at COP28?

1. “Phase out” fossil fuels

As Pope Francis states in *Laudate Deum*, governments must agree to speed up the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy.

At COP28, the UK must work with other countries to ensure that strong language to “phase out” fossil fuels is included in the decision text, with commitments made to end investment in fossil fuels domestically and overseas, while rapidly scaling up investment in renewable energy.

The UK government must also play its part in ending the fossil fuel era by committing to cease direct and indirect funding for fossil fuel projects overseas, including those financed by British International Investment (BII).⁴

2. Fund the Loss and Damage Fund

The Pope acknowledges in *Laudate Deum* the agreement at COP27 to establish a ‘Loss and Damage Fund’. This is intended to provide financial assistance to developing countries that have suffered destruction to livelihoods, property and resources, as well as ‘non-economic’ damage to cultural and spiritual aspects of communities.⁵ This is in recognition of the injustice that communities that have contributed least to causing the climate crisis are being hit hardest.

However, as Pope Francis notes, the details of how the fund will operate “remain imprecise, above all the concrete responsibility of the countries that have to contribute.”

Governments at COP28 must commit to designing a Loss and Damage Fund with adequate, grant-based funding arrangements and specific plans to support countries facing both economic and non-economic losses and damages. Governments must not allow finance provided for the fund to deepen debt crises in climate-vulnerable

countries. The UK government must commit to providing its fair share of funding and this too must be in the form of grants, not loans.

At recent UN meetings, the UK and other developed countries proposed that the Loss and Damage Fund should be hosted by the World Bank. These proposals were rejected by developing countries.⁶ This was on the grounds that: the World Bank focuses on loans rather than grants; that a World Bank-managed fund would not be accessible to communities; and that such a fund would not be equitably governed by a board comprising representatives of both developed and developing countries. The UK should use its position on the Loss and Damage Transitional Committee to push other developed countries away from these World Bank proposals and promote the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund as an independent entity under the UNFCCC at COP28.

3. Meet existing climate finance pledges – and mobilise new climate finance

Rich governments must act on promises made in 2009 to provide at least \$100bn per annum in climate finance to developing countries. This is to assist vulnerable countries to adapt to the effects of the climate crisis and to cut their own emissions.

COP28 must also see rich countries set out how new forms of finance can be provided to meet the real scale of funding required for countries on the frontlines of the climate crisis – a need that exceeds the current \$100bn target many times over.⁷ The UK government must push for countries to establish a suitably ambitious 'New Quantified Collective Goal' for meeting these future climate finance needs. Public finance will not provide all the future finance required, and private finance will play a role. However, private finance tends to be channelled to middle-income countries, with only around 30 per cent flowing to low-income countries most vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis.⁸ Private finance must not be provided as loans and concessional finance as these will add to the debt burdens of countries facing the effects of climate and debt crises.

New finance is therefore needed from innovative approaches and sources, including from: cancelling debt for countries facing the effects of both the climate crisis and debt distress; increasing the lending power of multilateral development banks; recycling a greater proportion of IMF 'Special Drawing Rights' to low-income countries; and taxing polluting activities.

The UK government must also meet its own climate finance commitments with additional new funds, rather than relying on re-badging existing finance given to British International Investment, the World Bank and other institutions.⁹

In addition, the UK must pass legislation to prevent private creditors from suing countries in debt distress to force payment. This is crucial as countries across the global south are currently spending five times more on debt repayments than they are on tackling the impacts of the climate crisis.¹⁰ The UK has an important role, given that around ninety per cent of debt contracts between private lenders and governments are governed by English law.¹¹

4. Reform the global food system to tackle the climate crisis

Pope Francis has been a strong advocate of reforming global food systems.¹²

It is essential that food systems be considered at COP28, given that food production is responsible for up to 30 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions.¹³ This is largely due to industrial-scale production of commodities and deforestation for commercial agriculture. At the same time, the climate crisis is itself impacting people's ability to grow and access food.

Governments at COP28 must commit to transform food systems through progress on the 'Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on Agriculture', bringing about a genuinely sustainable agriculture system that ensures the rights of smallholder farmers.¹⁴

The UK government itself must develop a cross-departmental strategy to provide support for more resilient food systems internationally, channelling financial and technical support towards small-scale farmers and away from big agricultural companies that damage the environment.

What can parliamentarians do to respond to the Pope's call?

We encourage all parliamentarians to write to the Prime Minister and urge the UK government to push during COP28 for the action Pope Francis implores leaders to take.¹⁵

This briefing has been produced by Catholic international development agencies CAFOD and SCIAF, alongside the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

Please contact Liam Finn (lfinn@cafod.org.uk) for more information on the issues covered by this briefing, including the opportunity to speak to policy experts and CAFOD and SCIAF partners working with communities on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

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¹ World Health Organisation (2023). *Snapshot: Greater Horn of Africa food insecurity and health – grade 3 emergency: 12 July 2023.*

² World Bank; CIAT (2015). *Climate-Smart Agriculture in Kenya. CSA Country Profiles for Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean Series.* Washington D.C.: The World Bank Group.

³ CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund (2020). *Powering past oil and gas: Energy choices for just and sustainable development.* Page 7.

⁴ See CAFOD's February 2023 submission to the International Development Committee's inquiry into *Investment for Development: the UK's strategy towards development finance institutions.*

⁵ London School of Economics, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (2023). *What is 'non-economic' loss and damage (NELD)?.*

⁶ Financial Times (21 October 2023). *Climate fund talks collapse as rich and developing countries clash.* By Attracta Mooney.

Climate Action Network International (23 October 2023). *Loss & Damage Fund meeting ends with no outcome as countries fail to agree on key aspects of the funds role.*

⁷ London School of Economics, Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (2023). *What is climate finance?*

⁸ OECD (2022). *Climate Finance Provided and Mobilised by Developed Countries in 2016-2020: Insights from Disaggregated Analysis, Climate Finance and the USD 100 Billion Goal.* OECD Publishing, Paris. doi.org/10.1787/286dae5d-en

⁹ See CAFOD Twitter post, 17 October 2023:
<https://twitter.com/CAFOD/status/1714321789331878234>

¹⁰ Debt Justice (2023). *The debt and climate crises: Why climate justice must include debt justice.* By Tess Woolfenden and Dr Sindra Sharma Khushal.

¹¹ Jubilee Debt Campaign (2020). *The UK's role in supporting the G20 debt suspension.*

¹² Pope Francis (2015). *Laudato si'.* Paragraph 129.

¹³ European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by the Science Communication Unit, The University of the West of England, Bristol (25 January 2023). *Science for Environment Policy.*

¹⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2023). *Sharm el-Sheikh joint work on implementation of climate action on agriculture and food security.*

¹⁵ Cf Pope Francis (2023). *Laudate Deum.* Paragraph 59.