

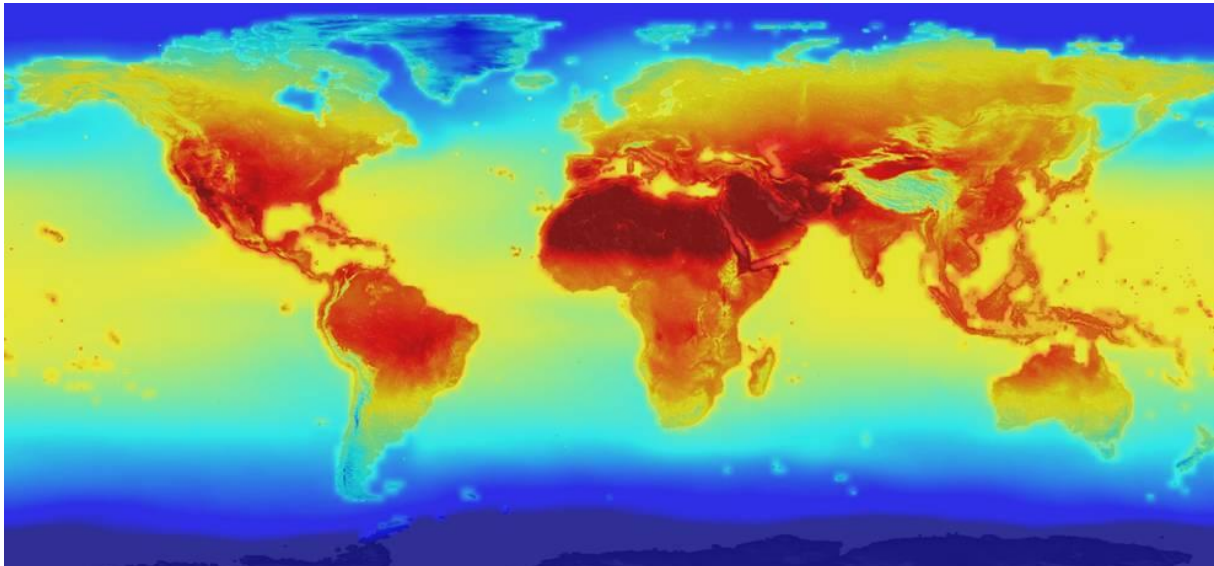
In Focus

COP26: “Code red for humanity”

Published Monday, 01 November, 2021

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Climate change is profoundly altering the world around us and some of its consequences may already take hundreds of years to reverse. Those are among the stark conclusions from the International Panel on Climate Change’s most recent report, findings the United Nations secretary general has called a wake-up call for humanity. As world leaders prepare to gather in Glasgow for the COP26 climate summit, this article examines the potential for a lasting agreement to tackle global warming.



In November 2021, the UK and Italy will jointly host the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26), the international summit on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Ahead of the meeting, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has released its sixth report assessing the science related to climate change.

The report’s conclusions are profound. Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. Scientists are also observing changes across the whole of Earth’s climate system; in the atmosphere, in the oceans, ice floes, and on land. Many of these changes are unprecedented, and the report warns that some, such as continued sea level rise, may be ‘irreversible’ for centuries to millennia ahead.

However, the IPCC says there is still time to limit climate change; provided international consensus can be found at forums such as COP26 on the way forward.

‘A code red’

The IPCC report shows that since the period between 1850 and 1900 emissions of greenhouse gases from human activities have contributed to approximately 1.1°C of global warming. If that trend

continues for the next 20 years, and the report's authors suggest that it will under all the emissions scenarios they analysed, then global temperature will reach or exceed 1.5°C of warming by 2040. They also believe that, without significant action, limiting warming to close to 1.5°C or even 2°C will be beyond reach.

The consequences could be as significant as they are far-reaching. The IPCC warn of increasingly extreme heatwaves, droughts, and flooding in regions across the world. Moreover, while many characteristics of climate change directly depend on the level of global warming, the report notes that what people experience is often very different to the global average. For example, warming over land is more than twice as high in the Arctic. The UN Refugee Agency also warns that, while entire populations are already suffering the impacts of climate change, vulnerable people living in some of the most fragile and conflict-affected countries are often disproportionately affected.

The UN secretary general, António Guterres, described the IPCC's findings as "nothing less than a code red for humanity". Adding that "the alarm bells are deafening and the evidence is irrefutable", Mr Guterres called on all nations to urgently step up their efforts and pursue the most ambitious path to cutting emissions.

What needs to be done?

The IPCC are clear that human action can still decide the course of the planet and that decisive steps are needed to reduce and stabilise levels of global heating.

IPCC working group I co-chair Panmao Zhai said "stabilizing the climate will require strong, rapid, and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, and reaching net zero CO₂ emissions". He added that limiting other greenhouse gases and air pollutants, especially methane, could also have benefits both for health and the climate.

Similarly, UN secretary general Guterres said that the solutions were clear, adding that "inclusive and green economies, prosperity, cleaner air and better health are possible for all, if we respond to this crisis with solidarity and courage". With specific regard to COP26, Mr Guterres said it was vital that all nations, and particularly the advanced G20 economies, committed to net zero and reinforced their promises on slowing down and reversing global heating with credible, concrete, and enhanced nationally determined contributions (NDCs) containing detailed steps to reduce emissions.

Will COP26 lead to a viable solution?

It remains to be seen whether COP26 can build on the progress made at earlier summits, particularly in Paris in 2015, and deliver the level of change needed to address global warming.

Leading the UK Government's efforts is COP26 president designate Alok Sharma, who set out the UK's four key goals for COP26 in a speech in March 2020:

1. All countries to submit more ambitious nationally determined contributions (NDCs), committing to further cuts in carbon emissions by 2030.
2. All countries to commit to reach net zero emissions as soon as possible.
3. Developed countries to honour their commitments, including meeting the 2020 100-billion dollar a year goal for climate finance.
4. Seeking to agree a package which takes forward the Paris agreement.

However, before the summit has begun questions have already been raised over the commitment of some of the participating nations to reducing emissions. They include China, Australia, Brazil and Russia, who have reportedly committed to policies that could lead to significant rises in global temperatures.

Uncertainty also remains over whether some nations will be able to attend the conference due to coronavirus restrictions and the costs involved. Climate Action Network International, which represents more than 1,500 organisations from 130 countries, said that COP26 risked excluding many government delegates, civil society campaigners and journalists, particularly from so-called Global South countries, many of which are on the UK's Covid-19 'red list'. Campaigners argue this will risk solutions being imposed on these nations and that they will be disadvantaged as a result.

Despite these challenges, the UK Government remains committed to COP26 going ahead in November. Alok Sharma has called on nations across the world to act together to deliver the change needed to address climate change:

Our message to every country, government, business, and part of society is simple. The next decade is decisive, follow the science and embrace your responsibility to keep the goal of 1.5C alive. We can do this together, by coming forward with ambitious 2030 emission reduction targets and long-term strategies with a pathway to net zero by the middle of the century, and taking action now to end coal power, accelerate the roll out of electric vehicles, tackle deforestation and reduce methane emissions.

Read more

- International Panel on Climate Change, AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, August 2021
- House of Commons Library, COP26: the international climate change conference, Glasgow, UK, 21 July 2021

Cover image by NASA.