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## CIRCLES OF GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Power, Performance and Contestation at the UN Climate Conference COP26 in Glasgow



CSS WORKING PAPER SERIES

Working Paper No.4 – February 2022

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<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://uhh.de/wiso-css">http://uhh.de/wiso-css</a>
<b>ISSN</b>	2699-8327
<b>DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-004">https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-004</a>
<b>Image Credits</b>	Collective

### To cite this paper:

**Aykut**, Stefan C.; **Pavenstädt**, Christopher N.; **Datchoua-Tirvaudey**, Alvine; **D’Amico**, Emilie; **Braun**, Max; **Karnik Hinks**, Ella; **Schenuit**, Felix; **Wilkens**, Jan; **Rödder**, Simone (2022): Circles of Global Climate Governance. Power, Performance and Contestation at the UN Climate Conference COP26 in Glasgow. CSS Working Paper Series No 4, Hamburg, <https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-004>.

## Abstract

The working paper examines the UN climate conference (COP26) organised in Glasgow in November 2021 as a transnational mega-event, which constituted not only an important moment in international climate talks, but also a temporary convergence point for a multitude of actors and an arena for conflicts and contestation over framing within a broader global policy space. This perspective allows us to offer a view of the current state of global climate politics more comprehensive than those of analyses focused mainly on the negotiations. Using collaborative event ethnography, over two weeks eight researchers identified the material, spatial and social dimensions of the conference. We identify three circles of climate governance, which framed practices, interactions and debates in Glasgow. These comprise an inner circle of state-led negotiations ('The In'), an official side programme ('The Off') and a relatively heterogeneous wider environment of self-organised events ('The Fringe'). Each circle is populated by a different set of actors and enacts a distinct representation of 'the global'. Our analysis of dynamics within each of these circles shows that climate governance has entered a new and contradictory phase, where some boundaries are blurred while others are reaffirmed, and where old conflicts resurface while new dividing lines appear. The Paris architecture for reporting and review has been finalised, but thus far the new approach has failed to close gaps between pledges and objectives for mitigation and climate finance. Global political and corporate elites have seemingly come to acknowledge the climate emergency and the need for a global low-carbon transformation, but the solutions proposed in Glasgow remained partial and fragile, and tightly contained within the dominant horizon of capitalist market- and techno-fixes. The communication strategy of the UNFCCC and the UK Presidency used increasingly radical terms to convey urgency and momentum, which in turn risked emptying activist notions of their content and force. A growing part of the climate movement reacted with critiques of corporate takeover and calls for "real zero" instead of "net zero". In the conclusion, we examine a series of contentious issues and provide avenues for reflection on the future of climate governance.

**Keywords:** Global climate governance, COP26, collaborative event ethnography, climate movement, climate justice

# CIRCLES OF GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

## Power, Performance and Contestation at the UN Climate Conference COP26 in Glasgow

Stefan C. Aykut, Christopher N. Pavenstädt, Alvine Datchoua-Tirvaudey, Emilie D'Amico, Max Braun, Ella Karnik Hinks, Felix Schenuit, Jan Wilkens and Simone Rödder

### Introduction

Already, much has been written about the 26th UN Climate Conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November 2021. Among the most complete recaps are, as every year, the Earth Negotiations Bulletin's 40-page negotiations breakdown (IISD 2021) and the equally voluminous conference summary of Carbon Brief (Evans et al. 2021). Most reports focus the bulk of their analyses on the interstate negotiations and their main outcome - the so-called Glasgow Climate Pact. Appreciations of this outcome varied widely among observers: for climate activist Greta Thunberg, it was more "blah blah blah".<sup>1</sup> The Guardian activist columnist George Monbiot called it a "pathetic, limp rag of a document".<sup>2</sup> Analysts closer to the negotiation process mostly took a more nuanced stance. Joanna Depledge from the Cambridge Centre for Environment, Energy and Natural Resource Governance even saw "a surprisingly positive reset of intergovernmental efforts to combat climate change" (Depledge 2021). And for the research team of the Wuppertal Institute, the COP26 results constitute a relative success and possible "turning point" for global climate action - albeit with some caveats (Obergassel et al. 2021).

So why another report? What can we add to the debate that has not already been said or written? We believe that the benefit of this report lies in its proposed shift in focus. It does not primarily centre on the negotiations and the formal outputs of the conference. Instead, it examines the Glasgow climate conference as a transnational mega-event, which constantly overflowed the confines of the negotiation rooms and the boundaries of the United Nations 'Blue Zone' at Glasgow's Scottish Exhibition and Conference Centre. In doing so, we follow a tradition of collective observations of UN Climate Conferences that was initiated by Amy Dahan and her team at EHESS Paris and taken up in subsequent observations.<sup>3</sup> These studies widen the focus, from analysing interstate negotiations at COPs (Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC), to examining UN Climate Conferences as temporary convergence points for a multitude of actors within a larger governance process, and as conflictual arenas for framing contests within a broader global climate politics. Seen through this lens, UN Climate Conferences can be described as being composed of three nested circles, beginning with the negotiation rooms, extending then to the wider UN zone hosting side events, observer stands and country pavilions, and expanding again from there to the streets, meeting spaces and hotels of the host city (Dahan et al. 2009). Akin to a theatre or music festival, they comprise an inner circle of high profile events ('The In'), an official side-programme ('The Off') and a relatively heterogeneous wider environment of self-organised events ('The Fringe'). This metaphor

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/GretaThunberg/status/1459612735294029834>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/GeorgeMonbiot/status/1459462692700368897?s=20>

<sup>3</sup> See Dahan et al. (2009, 2010) and Aykut et al. (2017, 2020). The method of collaborative event ethnography to study transnational mega-events is explained in Brosius and Campbell (2010).

includes both a spatial-physical and a social dimension. Spatially, material barriers, concrete walls and accreditation rules regulate movement across the different zones. Socially, each circle hosts a different set of actors and practices, and enables or constrains different forms of climate politics. By looking at these circles in conjunction, we can form a fuller picture of the state of global climate politics than is allowed by a sole focus on the negotiations. It also enables us to give voice to a different set of actors and discourses. But this shift in focus also demands a shift in observation methods. To follow actors, practices and political dynamics across all three spaces in Glasgow, we had to “be there” and engage in ethnographic observations with a team. Over the two weeks of the November conference, eight researchers were physically in Glasgow, both within and outside the conference hall. One additional researcher observed remotely, screening the daily online documentation and watching the internet webcasts of events. We shared information through regular meetings and a common observation matrix. We also adopted a common focus on performances and dramaturgical practices at the conference, and shared an interest in the transformation of UN Climate Conferences as a political arena.<sup>4</sup>

The structure of this report roughly follows that of the three circles, beginning with a narrower focus in the first circle and successively zooming out to encompass the wider second and third circles. The first section puts the spotlight on the ‘In’, the intergovernmental space. It takes stock of the negotiations, examines the practice of state-led assessments of progress within the Paris framework, and situates the Glasgow conference within a shifting landscape of climate geopolitics. The second section analyses developments within the UN spaces with restricted access, the ‘Off’, notably the so-called ‘Blue’ and ‘Green’ Zones. By providing a stage for NGOs, private sector initiatives, city networks and activist campaigns, these spaces embody the ‘polycentric’ turn in global climate governance. Their role is traditionally distinct: whereas the Blue Zone encompasses official side events and country pavilions, and can only be accessed by accredited observers, the Green Zone historically emerged as a space for civil society activities and social movements, with much broader access for the local population. In Glasgow, however, access to the Green Zone was limited. In terms of participants and character of events, it functioned more like an extension of the civil society space of the Blue Zone than as an autonomous space on its own right. We therefore chose to include it in the second circle. The third section enlarges the focus out to the wider environment of the conference, the ‘Fringe’, analysing civil society activities and social movement actions across the host city of Glasgow. The boundaries of this space are necessarily fuzzy, as climate activism happens both inside and outside the conference walls, and often criss-crosses established separations between spaces.

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this report, we refer to our observational data and include only our own visual material. We quote from interviews and observations with reference to the circle (In, Off, Fringe) in which they took place and a date (e.g. I\_Off\_12.11.2021).

## PART 1. A new chapter in international climate talks ('The In')



Figure 1: Site Map Blue Zone, Subway Billboard, Broadcast Studio in the Negotiations Area

When entering the conference area after having passed a range of billboards in the subway reading “The world is looking to you, COP26” and the queues at the UN security check, the participant could easily experience a moment of dizziness when trying to understand the site map and locate a side event or negotiation room in the hallways and hangars of the Glasgow Conference Centre. On the right side after the entrance was the shiny Climate Action Zone (see part 2), whereas the left led into a neatly designed space with a food court and huge flat screens displaying low-carbon advertisements, as well as the pavilions of countries, international organisations and private climate networks. The negotiation rooms were located further along, in another complex. Here, the atmosphere was much more sober and functional, featuring neither ornaments nor big colourful screens. Instead, a carpeted floor dampened the footsteps of busy delegates running from one meeting to another, observers trying to obtain a seat in one of the informal meeting rooms, and journalists waiting in the hallways to catch a minister or head of delegation for a brief interview or recap of the latest geopolitical quarrel. Only the main plenary hall, an immense hangar with hanging screens, arranged in simple UN style, conveyed some sense of ceremonial grandeur.

### Crafting a global political signal: the Glasgow Climate Pact

It was in this plenary hall that the main outcome of the two-week negotiations, the so-called Glasgow Climate Pact, was adopted. The expectations attached to this document had been immense. “Do Judge a COP by its Cover Decision”, urged the Climate Action Network’s daily newsletter (CAN, 9.11.2021), for instance. But the fact that such ‘cover decisions’ are considered, as the newsletter goes on to argue, “one of the most important outcomes of [a] COP” is a rather new phenomenon. COP25 had produced a similar document, the Chile Madrid Time for Action, and so had a handful of previous COPs (for instance the Bali Road Map from 2007). However, the importance given to the Glasgow Climate Pact also reflects a broader governance shift initiated by the Paris Agreement, in which the provision of political signals (Oberthür et al. 2020) and the creation of momentum (Aykut et al. 2021) are deemed key outcomes of climate conferences.



Figure 2: Plenary Pen y Fan

The Pact is composed of three cover decisions from the main negotiating bodies, relating respectively to the Climate Convention (COP), the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and the Paris Agreement (CMA). In the eyes of the UK Presidency, the aim of this document was to provide a clear overall political narrative of the Glasgow conference for a global audience. Conference president Alok Sharma, looking to craft this initiative, took many delegations by surprise by including a call “to accelerate the phasing-out of coal and subsidies for fossil fuels” in the first draft of the cover decision published on 10 November. Observers rightfully considered this a very significant proposal. Not only are explicit references to fossil fuels extremely rare in climate talks; they are virtually non-existent in official documents such as treaties or COP decisions. The publication of the draft therefore sparked intense negotiations and a sudden change in what participants had described before this move as a surprisingly positive and constructive negotiating atmosphere. Despite the publication of a new, considerably amended and weakened version of the text, tensions intensified until a last-minute standoff during Saturday evening’s Presidency Stocktake in the main plenary hall. In an earlier session on the same day, diplomatic heavyweights such as China and Iran had already voiced strong criticism of what they saw as an undifferentiated treatment of countries with very different situations and development needs. Later in the evening, India spearheaded the opposition, when environment and climate minister Bhupender Yadav took the floor for a long and much-discussed intervention, where he argued against a general ban on coal,

“Developing countries have a right to their fair share of the global carbon budget and are entitled to the responsible use of fossil fuels within this scope. In such a situation, how can anyone expect that developing countries can make promises about phasing out coal and fossil fuel subsidies? Developing countries have still to deal with their development agendas and poverty eradication. Towards this end, subsidies provide much needed social security and support.”

This intervention elicited a series of supporting statements by South Africa, Nigeria, Venezuela and others, which stressed historical responsibilities of the North and development needs in the South. These were in turn followed by an emotional response by EU Climate commissioner Frans Timmermans and a series of sometimes equally dramatic statements in favour of the proposed text by representatives from other developed countries, but also from vulnerable developing countries and small island states such as Tuvalu. Adopted after intense negotiations between the Presidency and the opposing phalanx of large developing countries, the final version of the text now reads, “phasing down unabated coal power and phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies”. These formulations are not new - the G20 Pittsburgh summit Leaders’ Declaration from 2009 (!), for instance, includes a plea for “phasing out ... inefficient fossil fuel subsidies”. More importantly, the formulation “phase down coal [consumption]” had been coined in the U.S.-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s, a bilateral initiative published on 10 November, which indicated possible landing zones for an outcome that the two superpowers could agree on. The significance of this episode can hardly be overestimated. In terms of issues at stake, interests at play and ad-hoc alliances formed, as well as in terms of its dénouement in the form of a compromise among big emitters from the North and South, this episode clearly sketches major lines of conflict that will structure global climate politics in the coming decades.

The Glasgow Climate Pact also includes a series of concrete elements on accelerating climate action. It “notes with serious concern” that current pledges are insufficient and would lead to a 13.7% increase in emissions between 2010 and 2030. It proposes a series of measures to counter that tendency, including a work programme on faster reductions “in this critical decade”, with a report due at COP27, an annual ministerial roundtable on “pre-2030 ambition”, and a “request” to parties to “revisit and strengthen” their NDCs by the end of 2022. This goes beyond the provisions in the Paris Agreement’s article 4.9, which requires submissions of new or strengthened NDCs only every five years. Finally, the Pact includes a series of provisions for adaptation, finance and loss and damage, which we treat below in a dedicated section.

## **The Paris rulebook: finished business**

The most pressing issues on the negotiation agenda at COP26 concerned the operationalisation of the Paris framework. Six years after the adoption of the Paris Agreement and one year after its main mechanisms should have entered into force, important elements of its reporting and transparency scheme, as well as of the carbon market mechanisms introduced in its article 6, had still not been agreed upon. The successful closure of these issues undoubtedly constitutes one of the major achievements of COP26.

In the Paris architecture, transparent reporting introduces a common, top-down element into an otherwise bottom-up approach of country pledges. Determining common rules for the content and format of country reports is therefore key. Open questions at COP26 concerned seemingly exotic or technical issues, such as the content of the “structured summary” of biennial transparency reports (BTRs), “common reporting tables” for GHG inventories and “common tabular formats” for reporting progress on implementation. However, in a context where only transparent reporting can enable other countries, external stakeholders and the global public to assess progress on implementation and pressure governments to progressively raise ambitions, these elements are crucial. On a political level, discussions also raised issues of differentiation between developed and developing countries, where the latter generally argued for a greater degree of flexibility in fulfilling their reporting duties, whereas the former insisted on common rules and procedures for all. Another agenda item concerned the alignment of NDCs on “common time frames”. While the Paris agreement defines common dates for NDC submissions, the time frame to be covered in these was still harshly disputed. Before the conference, the EU joined the US and China in a plea for five-year time frames aligned on the five-year submission cycles for NDCs. Saudi

Arabia, Japan and Russia supported a ten-year option, whereas the Arab Group and the Like-Minded Developing Countries argued for different timeframes for developed and developing countries. The final decision “encourages” all parties to submit five-year pledges, starting in 2025 for pledges covering the period from 2030 onwards. While not legally binding, this does constitute a step towards greater uniformity and comparability of country pledges.

Finally, COP26 struck a compromise on the highly contentious issue of carbon markets. Article 6 of the Paris Agreement introduces the possibility that countries may fulfil their pledges through “voluntary cooperation”. This includes bilateral cooperation via “internationally traded mitigation outcomes” (article 6.2) and the creation of a new international carbon market (article 6.4). Details of these mechanisms were left out of the Paris deal. Subsequently, four issues proved particularly controversial: (1) how to avoid double counting of emissions; (2) whether to allow the use of older Kyoto credits in the new scheme (“carry over”); (3) whether to impose a levy on transactions to finance adaptation (“share of proceeds”); and (4) how to ensure an overall rise in ambition, for instance by automatically cancelling a predefined amount of credits per transaction. Negotiations at COP25 failed when Brazil and Australia took uncompromising stances on carryover credits and double counting, which risked completely undermining the environmental integrity of the new markets. The outcome agreed in Glasgow represents a typical UN compromise. It appears relatively ambitious on double counting, by applying “corresponding adjustments” for all carbon credits traded under article 6.4, including those from other carbon offset schemes (such as the CORSIA scheme for aviation). However, a relatively modest 5% share of the value of offsets traded in the global carbon market will be used for the Adaptation Fund, and 2% of each transaction will be cancelled automatically to deliver “overall mitigation”. Moreover, both mechanisms remain voluntary in bilateral carbon trading. The compromise also permits the use of carbon credits generated under the Kyoto Protocol since 2013. This potentially brings up to 320 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (MtCO<sub>2</sub>e) into the new mechanism.<sup>5</sup>

To add to these problems, the track record of market mechanisms in international climate cooperation is notoriously poor. As Matthew Paterson (2021) argues, “There is considerable evidence that carbon offset projects – such as wind farms, which emissions trading can fund – have failed to deliver a reduction in overall emissions. A 2017 study led by the EU Commission found that 85% of projects funded by the CDM hadn’t reduced emissions”. In the bottom-up Paris framework, monitoring will be even more difficult, and the rules decided in Glasgow in this regard appear relatively opaque and unclear. The issue of carbon markets is therefore far from closed. It will remain an area of struggles for transparency, and will continue to require high levels of scrutiny by civil society into the future.

## **A deceptive practice of existing assessments**

Transparent reporting, assessment and review are key pillars of the ambition mechanism of the Paris agreement. Published shortly before COP26, the 2021 UNEP Emissions Gap Report clearly demonstrated why such a mechanism is important: full implementation of submitted NDCs, it concluded, would only reduce projected 2030 emissions by 7.5%, a far cry from the 55% reduction needed to meet the 1.5°C goal. But can country-led review and assessment exercises help close this ambition gap, and if so, how? This remains an open question. Transparency and review mechanisms are expected to build trust among states, contribute to policy learning and exert pressure on laggards through ‘naming and shaming’. Their capacity to do so, however, is often assumed rather than being empirically observed (Gupta & Van Asselt 2019). Analyses of how reporting and assessment exercises unfold in practice are therefore critical.

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<sup>5</sup> See the detailed discussion in the *Carbon Brief* report on the outcomes of COP26 (Evans et al. 2021).

The Paris framework combines a continuous assessment process in which states submit biennial transparency reports (BTRs) and national GHG inventories, and a collective review called the Global Stocktake, which takes place every 5 years. Assessments start in 2022 for developed and 2024 for developing countries, and involve a technical review and a “facilitative multilateral consideration of progress”. The first Global Stocktake will officially start at COP27 in Sharm-el-Sheik, Egypt and run until COP28 in the United Arab Emirates. These upcoming reviews and assessments will, to a large extent, follow the path of existing formats and practises. The Talanoa Dialogue, organised between 2018 and 2019, for instance, represented an interesting test run for the Global Stocktake. While it did provide a forum for discussing achievements and best practices, it also showed parties’ reluctance to raise critical questions and point out implementation gaps (Aykut et al. 2020). Existing multilateral assessments (called “facilitative sharing of views” for developing countries) show similar patterns. In Glasgow, a total of ten developed countries and seven developing countries underwent peer review in these formats, on 5 and 6 November. Discussions did in some cases involve more direct questions on policy choices and implementation strategies, as when the Indian delegate asked his Polish counterpart, “Our first point is that we observe that Poland is dependent on coal. Is there a plan on how this dependency will reduce and is there a plan for phase out and if so by when, since the Biennial Report says that emissions from coal will increase by 2030?”

In general, however, assessments were performed in a highly diplomatic tone, and speakers regularly congratulated each other for constructive engagement and progress made. While a non-adversarial environment might be important to create trust and facilitate learning, it certainly does not exert pressure on laggards. Instead of ‘name and shame’, existing assessments provide opportunities to ‘claim and shine’ (Aykut et al. 2020). The lack of controversy also exacerbates another problem: existing assessments attract very low levels of public attention. Far from the highly mediated plenary meetings or Presidency events targeting a large on-site and remote audience, assessments take place in more informal configuration. They are organised as open meetings, but access for observers is de facto limited by room capacity and organisational set up. These spatial limitations could be easily addressed by future COPs. However, problems of design run deeper. The Paris Agreement’s mandate of multilateral assessments stipulates that they be conducted in a “facilitative, non-intrusive, non-punitive manner ... and avoid placing undue burden on Parties” (article 13.3). This de facto excludes critical discussions, which would in turn increase participation and visibility. Here again, effective accountability can therefore only be implemented with the help of civil society, through initiatives such as the Independent Global Stocktake (iGST), but also through direct actions that target laggards and raise awareness on implementation gaps.

## **A ‘trust gap’ in climate finance**

“Money was, perhaps, the issue that defined the COP26 negotiations more than any other, permeating virtually every aspect of the talks,” notes the Carbon Brief report (Evans et al. 2021). This is hardly an overstatement, as discussions on finance took place in a range of settings and negotiation tracks, and frequently made media headlines. However, the long history of climate finance in the UNFCCC is full of broken promises and bitter disappointments, and the first days of the Glasgow conference provided yet another episode in this drama. Developed countries had promised in Copenhagen in 2009 to progressively ramp up financial flows, to reach at least 100 billion dollars annually by 2020. Glasgow was to deliver on this promise. However, an OECD estimate published before the conference found a \$20 billion gap in annual flows, and predicted that the \$100 billion target would not be met before 2023. The tone for the opening was set by the striking contrast between the failure to deliver these relatively modest amounts and the apparent ease with which the same governments had just mobilized gigantic sums in COVID-19 stimulus packages. At the World Leaders’ Summit organised at the start of the conference on 2 November,

developing country representatives bemoaned a widening “trust gap” in climate talks. In the words of Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados:

*“Failure to provide the critical finance [...] is measured, my friends, in lives and livelihoods in our communities. This is amoral, and it is unjust [...] The central banks of the wealthiest countries engaged in 25 trillion dollars of quantitative easing in the last 13 years, 25 trillion. [...] Had we used the 25 trillion to purchase bonds to finance the energy transition or the transition of how we eat or how we move ourselves in transport, we would now today be reaching that 1.5 degree limit that is so vital to us.”*

To defuse a potentially explosive situation and avoid a false start to the conference, the UK Presidency quickly released a “delivery plan” for climate finance until 2023 before talks commenced. During the conference, the US, Germany, the EU and a number of other countries, as well as philanthropic foundations, tried to save the façade with new financial pledges. While this made for some improvements - for the first time, the Adaptation Fund collected US\$356 million, and the Least Developed Countries Fund US\$413 million - it also forcefully illustrated the limits of the current approach, in which climate finance is mobilised purely on an ad hoc basis. The succession of highly mediated announcements and public quarrels at COP26 also masked a series of deeper, underlying problems. Among these are the lack of an operational definition of climate finance, both in terms of sources (i.e. whether only public funds are to be counted, or also private finance; North-South transfers alone or also South-South transfers; exclusively international finance or also domestic finance, etc.) and in terms of sectors and activities classified as sustainable, as well as the issues of predictability and additionality (vs. relabeling of development aid) of financial flows.

An alternative to the current system of ad hoc funding would be a ‘structured’ approach. Joanna Depledge suggests that such an approach could emulate elements of the ozone regime’s financial mechanism, by combining regular technical assessments of financial needs with a procedure to establish rules for each country’s “share of contributions”, derived from wider UN practice. Given the dazzling amounts needed to build low carbon futures and adapting to a changing climate in the Global South, it seems difficult to imagine such an approach being implemented in climate talks. Interestingly, a first step was nonetheless made in Glasgow, with the launch of “deliberations” on a new “collective quantified goal on climate finance” to be agreed in 2024, and the creation of a new Glasgow-Sharm el-Sheik work programme on the global goal on adaptation. This undoubtedly lays the ground for heated debates over the next COPs.

Conflicts were similarly intense in discussions on a financial mechanism for Loss and Damage. After two years of weather extremes, including megafires in California and Greece and devastating floods in Germany and China, the issue had gained new traction, and the G77+China negotiating group proposed the establishment of a dedicated funding facility. This was fiercely opposed by developed countries, who traditionally try to avoid any step that could be interpreted as a recognition of liability and prepare future demands for reparation for climate impacts. States only accepted to fund technical assistance activities delivered by a group of experts, called the Santiago Network. Other necessary discussions, such as the role of the private financial and insurance sectors, or international cooperation in the face of extreme and slow-onset events, were adjourned to future COPs.

## PART 2. A Theatre of Global Climate Action ('The Off')

In a post-COP26 piece titled “Why COP27 Needs a Bigger Circus and More Solar Panels”,<sup>6</sup> climate economist and Bloomberg columnist Gernot Wagner explains why he believes the COP “circus” is important as a signal and public theatre of climate action. The obstruction of fossil interests can only be overcome, he argues, by reaching enough “positive tipping points”, whereupon “global politics, finance, and societal forces more broadly begin pushing in the right direction, [and] that positive wave, too, will seem like a tsunami.” This perfectly lays out the philosophy of the Paris approach, with its performative and “incantatory” elements, but also its reliance on market forces and green capitalism as solutions to the climate crisis (Aykut et al. 2021). All of these elements clearly permeated the Glasgow conference, where a flurry of net-zero pledges and sectoral announcements underpinned the COP Presidency’s upbeat communication strategy, while the Blue and Green Zones provided spaces for motivational speeches and displays of corporate climate solutions.

### A flurry of announcements and initiatives to “keep 1.5°C alive”

Part of this annual theatre of global climate action is a practice of ‘claiming and shining’ that is progressively becoming a central and pervasive part of UN climate conferences (Aykut et al., under review). Of course, there is a long tradition of political communication through target setting and country pledges in global climate politics (see e.g. Morsetto et al. 2017). With the polycentric turn in global climate governance, there is now a wider range of actors engaging in this practice, such as regions, cities, corporations and investors; it can be observed at official side events, in high-level meetings and in ad hoc media declarations. This is strikingly illustrated by the intervention of Eric Garcetti, Mayor of Los Angeles and chair of the C40 city network, as he addressed heads of state at the World Leaders’ Summit on 2 November:

*“Tonight my friends, I am proud to announce the biggest pledge at COP outside national commitments: that Cities Race To Zero has produced a global coalition of over 1,000 cities and local governments representing 722 million people, more than a quarter of world GDP committed to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050 and cutting their fair share, our fair share, of global emissions in half by 2030. The UN says that our collective action has the potential to reduce global emissions by at least 1.4Gt of CO2 emissions by 2030, annually”.*

In many settings and at many side events at Glasgow, the focus on pledges and promises went hand in hand with positive and optimistic emotional rhetoric about the added value, co-benefits, and economic potential of ambitious climate action. This “stubborn optimism” – as described by former UNFCCC Secretary Figueres – was also reflected in the way in which the UNFCCC Secretariat and COP Presidency set up the entire COP venue, by providing ample space for displays of private climate action in the Climate Action Zone and the Green Zone, as well as in the carefully orchestrated appearances of celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Barack Obama, and Bill Gates, among others. The communication strategy of the UK government also centred on positive announcements. Before the conference, Boris Johnson set the tone by promising to deliver on “cars, cash, coal and trees”. What followed was a “steady stream of ‘wins’” to produce a sense of momentum, even as official negotiations were stalling and the process of updating NDCs had clearly failed to deliver (Harvey 2021). These initiatives took the shape of Presidency declarations – a tool commonly used by COP Presidencies to highlight topics in line with their agenda – as well as joint

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-19/why-cop27-needs-a-bigger-circus-and-more-solar-panels>

statements by country groups and the launching of new alliances on specific themes or sectors. The actual outcome of these initiatives remains unclear and should be considered with caution, as long as these do not reach a certain degree of formalisation. Some, such as the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use and the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ), rely heavily on existing initiatives, and 'recycle' existing texts.<sup>7</sup> Others, such as the 'COP26 declaration on accelerating the transition to 100% zero emission cars and vans', which aims at phasing out internal combustion in new vehicles by 2040, are not sufficiently ambitious and do not include major governments. These initiatives are purposely staged and used as diplomatic devices to signal momentum during the COP. This being said, a 'governance by initiatives' can still produce effects, when it contributes to building administrative capacity, producing expertise and channelling money and resources to climate-friendly technologies. The Global Methane Pledge championed by the US government, for instance, was signed by over 100 countries, covering half of anthropogenic methane emissions. It aims at reducing global methane emissions by "at least 30 percent" from 2020 levels by 2030. Even if these targets are not ultimately met, the pledge will have attracted attention to the second most important source of greenhouse gas emissions, and will help to build inventories and develop methodologies to better quantify methane emissions.

In addition to this positive rhetoric, speeches and side events in the Blue Zone frequently use a more alarming register that foregrounds scientific warnings and dramatic stories of warming impacts, in order to emphasise the growing urgency to act (Aykut et al. 2020). At COP26, there was a considerable focus on the IPCC, which had just published its Sixth Assessment Report on the Physical Science Basis of our understanding of climate change, as well as on the climate modelling community, as two of the three laureates of the 2021 Nobel Prize for Physics were climate modellers and IPCC authors (Syukuro Manabe and Klaus Hasselmann). The COP Presidency joined forces with leading IPCC authors and representatives, emphasising the need for policy-relevant climate science to play a strong role in negotiations and in their outcomes, such as the Glasgow Pact (Forster et al. 2022). The report's conclusions constantly provided reference points for public speeches during press conferences and side events. Speakers used the report to stress that the 1.5°C temperature threshold might be crossed within the next two decades, and warned that this may cause irreversible changes. At many events, COP26 was presented as a potential turning point in history and a last chance to effect the necessary changes to limit temperature increases to a level compatible with the Paris goals. As in past years, other scientific reports had been published in line with the UNFCCC schedule. More explicit than the IPCC are the yearly updates of the Climate Action Tracker and the UNEP Emissions Gap Report, which pointed to the ambition gap between the submitted NDCs and the Paris goals. Alongside activists and observers, UN officials and members of the UK Presidency were among the most vocal in voicing concerns that the crossing of the 1.5°C global warming threshold was imminent.

This combination of positive and negative messaging was perfectly illustrated by the key policy message of the UK COP Presidency, which was repeated like a mantra throughout the conference. "Keeping 1.5°C alive", it was argued, should constitute the political legacy of COP26. The ground for this communication strategy had been prepared diplomatically during the UK's G7 presidency. Throughout 2021, COP President Alok Sharma and Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly highlighted the notion that accelerating decarbonisation would trigger economic opportunities and offer reasons for hope, while warning of the risks and costs associated with global warming exceeding the 1.5°C threshold. As a result of this strategy, for the first time since the publication of the IPCC 1.5°C Special Report, the operationalisation of a 1.5°C-

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<sup>7</sup> For the Declaration on Forests and Land Use, see Nikolas Sellheim's contextualisation <https://polarconnection.org/forests-and-land-use/>. The declaration texts can be found here: <https://ukcop26.org/glasgow-leaders-declaration-on-forests-and-land-use/> (Forests & Land Use), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cop26-declaration-zero-emission-cars-and-vans/> (cars) <https://www.gfanzero.com/> (finance).

compatible mitigation pathway (i.e. -45% CO<sub>2</sub> by 2030 and net zero by mid-century) was referenced in an official UNFCCC document, the Glasgow Climate Pact (see section 1 above) (Seneviratne et al. 2021). For future COP negotiations, this decision text could prove to be an important reference point, especially in the context of the upcoming Global Stocktake.

## Re-enchanting capitalism: an atmosphere for (green) business



Figure 3: Action Zone - View from the Tribunes

The spirit of the Paris Agreement, with its emotional communication and steady stream of pledges and promises, found a material embodiment in the Glasgow venue. The Climate Action Hub was conceived as a huge open space, with several stages and a huge illuminated globe representing the planet Earth hanging in the middle (it proved a very popular spot for selfies, and international media outlets used it as the visual background when conducting their live broadcasting from within the COP venue). This space was dominated on all sides by a sports arena-like architecture, composed of rows of seats stretching high above the ground level, from which spectators could achieve a synoptic view of events within the Action Hub. The UK COP Presidency described the area as “a dynamic events-space, where non-Party stakeholders can stage a variety of events, such as talk-shows, special launch events, competition winners announcements, games, interactive activities, or digital demonstrations, all of which focus on concrete climate action and provide a voice to the audience.” This Climate Action Hub took up and extended an idea introduced at COP25 in Madrid, where a half-open amphitheatre had been created to provide a stage for celebratory displays of non-state climate action (Aykut et al. 2020). It also took the idea to a whole new level, in terms of size and spatiality, but also in terms of theatricality and the presence of media and corporate actors. This was visible not only in the continuous display of COP26 sponsors on the walls of the Climate Action Hub (Bloomberg, Microsoft, Google), but also in the events taking place in the different spaces of the Action Hub. It provided ample room for innovative firms and startups, progressive city

leaders and young entrepreneurs to display their activities in multimedia presentations, Ted-style talks, and award ceremonies.

This configuration of space does not only reflect a corporate imaginary of social change through innovation and market forces and the growing dominance of marketing and communication techniques in global climate politics. It also stands for a larger shift in UN climate governance, which seeks to associate non-state actors through a multiplicity of new formats, such as the Marrakech Partnerships for Global Climate Action; a series of sectoral initiatives heralded by the so-called High-Level Climate Champions; the Race to Zero Campaign, comprising climate neutrality pledges from governments alongside cities, regions, businesses, investors, and higher education institutions; and the Global Climate Action Portal, which collects pledges from another set of non-state actors.

The flurry of initiatives and formats for displaying private and subnational climate action can be seen as a necessary complement to interstate negotiations and national climate policy. It must also be placed in the larger context of the repeated failures of multilateralism and a reorientation of climate governance in the post-Copenhagen years. Hence, the Lima-Paris Action Zone, a predecessor to many of these contemporary formats, was explicitly conceived as a way to drive policy change and enable a political agreement at COP21 in Paris, by changing the narrative on corporate climate action (Benabou et al. 2017). Instead of the then-dominant framing of business as an obstructive force opposed to climate action, it aimed to assemble a progressive corporate voice, and depict firms as an important driving force for a global low-carbon transformation. This new framing became a dominant mantra at COP26, introduced during the opening ceremony and speeches by heads of state and repeatedly emphasised by speakers in side events on energy transitions, sustainable technologies, or technological innovations to mitigate climate change. The message that business is ready not only marked a shift in the dominant narrative and framing of the 'private sector', but also changed the construction of responsibility in global climate governance. Boris Johnson's remark in his opening speech (later repeated by Mario Draghi and others) that "we [the states] have the billions, they [the private sector] have the trillions"<sup>8</sup>, reflects not only the attempt by state representatives to distribute the burden of responsibility by including other actors, but also the entangled nature of the state-market relations imagined by many participants as a necessary condition to tackle climate change.

This imaginary of market-led change and corporate leadership was present in many side events, panels and pavilions in the Blue Zone. Of course, as in previous years, the Blue Zone also hosted a variety of events organized by NGOs and civil society groups, think tanks and research institutions. As a result of a decades-long struggle for recognition within the UNFCCC, indigenous peoples had their own pavilion. However, entry barriers to the Blue Zone remain high, ensuring friendly conditions within it for this corporate turn. The costs of sending a delegation to the COP are prohibitive for smaller groups, those of renting a space and setting up a pavilion even more so. For many NGOs, an alternative is to approach 'their' national delegation and use the country pavilion to organise side events and provide information. This, however, necessitates an alignment with the governmental agenda and political priorities. Moreover, the sponsorship policy of the COP 26 Presidency, which offered unprecedented visibility to its funding partners in the COP venue, eventually showcased highly capitalistic, consumerist and energy-intensive multinational companies as a business model compatible with decarbonisation needs, and their actions as the solution to our collective problem. Consequently, while many countries and actors from places in the Global South that are already substantially affected by climate change had limited representation within the Blue Zone, the massive presence of actors lobbying for fossil fuel industries and nuclear energy

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/climate-emergency-cop26-boris-johnson-b1940927.html>

underlined the dominance of a discourse of technical fixes and market-based solutions for climate change.<sup>9</sup>

The spatiality of the Blue and Green Zone and its compartmentalisation further amplified asymmetries in access, visibility and representation. During the Leaders Summit in the first days of the conference, access to the negotiations area was closed down for many observers on very short notice. And during the full two weeks, the central part of the Blue Zone connecting the Action Zone and the meeting room area provided a stage for a limited number of state representatives and actors from the private sector, who promoted their solutions to the climate crisis and their narratives of how climate change can be tackled within existing capitalist structures. In Glasgow, in contrast to past COPs, this corporate take-over of civil society areas did not only occur in the Blue Zone, but included the Green Zone as well.

## A very corporate Green Zone

Since COP21, the Green Zone has been framed as a space for debating and creating exchanges between a diversity of non-state actors (Climate and Development Knowledge Network 2015). The ‘Espace Générations Climat’ in Paris started a tradition of organising a single open space on one floor with many available seats in various configurations enabling several thematic sub-spaces to interact.<sup>10</sup> This approach was reproduced in Bonn (COP23) and Madrid (COP25). Although the venues have been organised in various ways (e.g. at COP22 in Marrakech the “Innovations area” was separated from the “Civil society area”<sup>11</sup>), the Green Zone has increasingly been treated as the “civil society” space.

In Glasgow, a striking feature of the Green Zone was the high visibility of companies, which had largely uptaken social movements’ language and slogans. It seems that both civil society actors and companies were equated with the same status or at least that companies attempted to forge an image as being part of civil society’s response. The business sphere thus sought to renegotiate the meaning of “civil society”, while offering solutions supposedly tailored to the needs of youth, activists and green consumers. However, instead of growing partnerships on a stance of equity as a “community of practice” (Mannan et al. 2021), companies appropriated the terminology and concepts of Indigenous People, Black and People of Colour activists, social movements and environmental movements, using them as catchwords and emptying them of their meaning. Furthermore, in the slogans features in the showcases on the ground floor – e.g. “Powering change for a net zero future”, (SSE), “Power of all”, (National Grid)- the “power” was associated more with corporations than with civil society. Similarly, there were discrepancies in the embodiment of the different COP26 goals (which included “Urgently adapt to protect communities and natural habitats” for Adaptation, “Secure global net zero and keep 1.5 degrees within reach” for Mitigation, “Mobilise finance” and “Work together to deliver” for Collaboration). For example, the first floor of the Green Zone was organised around circular signposts referring to these objectives. In this space, the exhibit under “Adapt to protect” showed an air cleansing technology. The stand Playing for the Planet’s video games was located under the slogan “Mobile finance”. It is unclear whether there was any intention to match the signposts with the stands. Even so, the organisation of the space seemed to replicate the structure of the Blue Zone’s market-oriented pavilions, with a focus on technologies useful to major

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<sup>9</sup> Such as the powerful carbon trading association IETA: <https://www.ieta.org/page-18192/12124951>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyCywOFd0hE>

<sup>11</sup> UNFCCC.2016. *A Day in COP as an Observer. A Mini Practical Guide for UNFCCC COP 22/CMP 12/CMA 1.* <https://unfccc.int/process/conferences/pastconferences/marrakech-climate-change-conference-november-2016/overview/mini-guide-for-observers>

economies – such as the symbolically charged E-racing car (which attracted a lot of attention in the Blue Zone) that greeted visitors on the ground floor near the registration desk (Croeser 2021).



Figure 4: Reckitt and Sainsbury's Showcases of COP26 Sponsor, Green Zone Groundfloor

COP26 may represent a step change in the growing influence and power of companies, increasing the imbalance with civil society. Indeed, the space seemed to be pervasively occupied by business, science and technology. The main COP26 sponsors – “Principal partners”- (GSK, Hitachi, Microsoft, National Grid, NatWest Group, Reckitt, Sainsbury's, Scottish Power, Skye, SSE, Unilever) had imposing showcases covering most of the ground floor. It was an area of green consumerism, where corporations structured the space and interactions (Jacobs 2021). As such, the companies' visual communication found itself in a kind of limbo between adherence by less critical attendees, on the one hand, and criticisms of greenwashing, claims grabbing and knowledge grabbing, on the other (Wu 2021).

The capacity to create a space for interaction and exchange between a diversity of actors, as had been seen in earlier years, may arguably have been constrained from the start by the choice of the Glasgow Science Centre, although this is a matter of interpretation. The space was very dense and cramped with exhibits taking up most of the physical space in the venue. Most of the discussion spaces were located inside event rooms (the Science Show Theatre, Tower Base North and Tower Base South), and only accessible with pre-booked tickets (although allowances were made in cases of low turnout). Diverse voices (such as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour [BIPOC]) could be heard in these sessions depending on the setting, and the widespread use of the hybrid format connected speakers with a virtual audience (via the COP26 YouTube channel)<sup>12</sup>. However, the physical spaces for exchanges were considerably diminished relative to previous COPs. This created a compartmentalisation between spaces of discussion (panel discussions in event rooms, NGOs and university stands), of passive knowledge consumption (science and technology exhibits e.g. such as the Planetarium) and of marketing (with most of the ground floor taken up by the showcases of the “Principal partners” sponsoring the COP26).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/c/UnfccInt> ;<https://www.youtube.com/c/COP26>

Various features highlighted the location’s primary function as a museum. One of the upper floors was dedicated to an interactive exhibit inviting visitors to reflect on how to “reimagine museums for climate action” (pinning notes on a board). Furthermore, the choice of a museum for the Green Zone emphasised the function of staging and performance throughout the COP venues, as underlined previously for the Blue Zone.

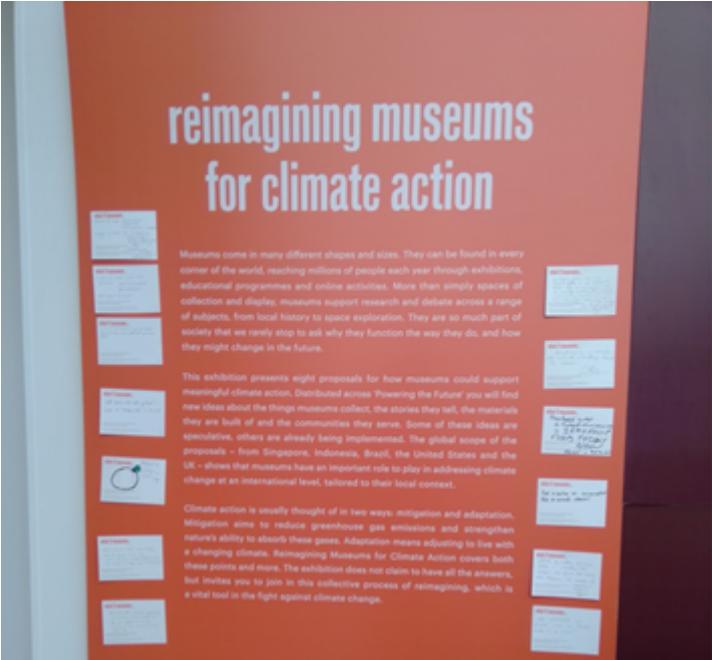


Figure 5: Participatory exhibit at the Science Centre

The expanding role of the corporations suggests an evolution of practices, from a decentralised to an increasingly centralised ordering of both spaces and discourses in global climate governance (Abbott 2018; Adler & Bernstein 2004). As such, the process of collective ethnography led us to identify an ambivalence wherein, on the one hand civil society was “pushed out” or abandoned the Green Zone which may have attracted a less critical public, while on the other hand, the discourse of states and businesses emphasised the importance of integrating and listening to “civil society” and “the youth”, which also resulted in the staging of the latter by the former in the Blue Zone Pavilions.

## PART 3. Struggles over meaning in activist discourses ('The Fringe')

The role of climate protest movements in the COP process is an established, yet ambiguous and contested one, not least among themselves. This can be initially exemplified by contrasting two quotes from our observations across 'the Fringe'. A first activist radically condemns the UNFCCC approach in a speech given at the alternative *People's Summit*: "In the core of the UNFCCC, there is the idea that 'the problem is carbon molecules.' This level of criminality, it is hard not to become a criminal once you are part of it. It is difficult to avoid the features of the system. This is organised crime, it is a crime scene. It is a system in which it is impossible to have hope. We need to get rid of the system before meaningful action is possible." (Speaker at the 'Tribunal', People's Summit, 7.11.2021). A second activist, accredited in the COP Blue Zone as an observer, adopts a much more moderate and pragmatic style: "I think you can work within the system while still seeking to change it, and also battling from outside the system, right? So this is an opportunity for climate activists to gather together, to challenge and hold people to account, and also to build a movement that will hopefully last and extend beyond COP and through the rest of the year. We want to have a seat at the table and still try to work within here, while it still exists, because there's no point in us just not showing up, because they're gonna carry on without us." (Interview in the Blue Zone, 3.11.2021). Treading the line between disillusion with and rejection of the COP process whilst utilising its force field to attract some of the attention this event generates was the key theme of activist mobilisation around COP26. This section explores the broader spatial and social environment of the Glasgow conference, observing and interpreting activist activities across the city ('the Fringe') as well as within the two inner circles (relating to the 'In' and the 'Off').

### Climate movements negotiating the inside and outside

The wide range of activists attracted to the conference, from traditional civil society actors<sup>13</sup> like environmental NGOs to activists pushing for more radical climate action, congregated in the COP26 Coalition, a heterogeneous body of nearly 200 organisations.<sup>14</sup> This coalition, much like movement coalitions at previous COPs, comprised a broad range of goals and strategic approaches. Observers have previously suggested a typology of moderate 'insider' and more radical 'outsider' groups,



Figure 6: Fridays for Future press conference, Action Hub

depending on whether they direct their activities at the negotiations and operate within the conference space or rely on protest outside it (Fisher 2010). As the initial quotes indicate, activists' 'inside' and 'outside'

<sup>13</sup> In the highly technical language of the UN, most actors in the UNFCCC process that do not represent government bodies, businesses or media are referred to as 'civil society'. However, many of the newer and more radical climate activists would not apply this label to their activities. The distinction between civil society and climate movements here is drawn with the contentious nature of social movements in mind (see Daniel & Neubert 2019; McAdam et al. 2001; Neidhardt & Rucht 2001)

<sup>14</sup> Yet with a stronger regional focus than at previous COPs – two thirds of the organisations were from the UK, at least partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic. See <https://cop26coalition.org/>.

action is guided by underlying positions, which respectively interpret the COP as a place to influence the negotiations (Uldam 2013, de Moor et al. 2017) in the aim of *re-scripting*, or to reject and fight it in the aim of *counter-scripting* (Aykut et al., under review). As experiences at previous COPs show, the partial inclusion of social movements in the UNFCCC process induces an “efficacy dilemma” in terms of which strategy to pursue especially for activists who fundamentally oppose the negotiations’ framework (de Moor et al. 2017). The dilemma consists in whether to participate and challenge the COP process from within, risking having one’s claims softened and endogenised, or to protest outside, risking not being noticed by delegates (and media) and thus not having an impact (cf. de Moor 2018: 1094).

If anything, this issue was more pronounced at COP26. An analysis of the messaging guides, movement calls and press releases before the COP showed a range of positions, from rather moderate to radical outsider. The COP26 Coalition and Extinction Rebellion (XR) declared the failure of COP26 before the conference had even begun, accusing the UNFCCC process of “mass manslaughter by gross negligence”.<sup>15</sup> These accusations were formulated as a charge sheet, signalling a lack of hope in the process. On the other hand, groups like Stop Climate Chaos Scotland (SCCS), a civil society network in Scotland, which was heavily involved in setting up an activist network called “Climate Fringe”, took a more constructive stance towards the process and acknowledged some steps in the right direction, e.g., by the Scottish government.



Figure 7: Activists performing a "Toxic Net Zero Tour"

Many movements and NGOs send accredited observers to the ‘In’ and ‘Off’. Exactly because “*the walls here are very thick*”,<sup>16</sup> activities inside the Blue Zone were deemed necessary. The Climate Action Hub emerged as a favourite spot for activists to congregate, plan and carry out actions directly in front of world media. Among many other actions, FFF staged a protest within the Hub, calling for the negotiating parties to “*show us the money*” and demanded that world leaders be held accountable for their unfulfilled

pledge to deliver US\$100 billion in climate finance by 2020.<sup>17</sup> Activists, such as those from the UK Youth Climate Coalition, regularly shared impressions in the aim of presenting “*what is going on on the inside*”, trying to increase the accountability and transparency of the process. In this light, their role was to *monitor* the process and progress of the COP26.

Some activists decided to participate in side-events in the Blue Zone, e.g. as speakers on panels, discussing solutions based on Paris terms such as *net-zero*, *nature-based solutions*, and *carbon markets*, which parts of the climate movement now reject. They thereby presented themselves as (critical) *participants* in the polycentric architecture of climate negotiations. This role was epitomised in the youth statement on nature-based solutions presented at a side event in the Blue Zone. “When youth say they want to be listened to, they said to us: bring something on the table. We now [...] bring solutions on the table.”<sup>18</sup> ‘The Youth’ turned out to be a central reference in side events in the Blue Zone, appearing almost everywhere

<sup>15</sup> <https://xrscotland.org/the-charge-against-cop26/>

<sup>16</sup> I\_Off\_06.11.2021.

<sup>17</sup> 10. IPCC Report and COP26 | “Our House is Still on fire” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pi-UysGmXQ0>

<sup>18</sup> O\_Off\_NaturePav\_06.11.2021.

at some point, again highlighting the dilemma of participating to have one's voice heard while being exposed to processes of co-optation. Despite some activists' background of radical dissent, in their performances in side-events, which often consisted of rather short panels, they fell back into roles provided by the Paris script.

For some activists, therefore, engagement with the Paris architecture felt not promising at all. Many were disillusioned by the re-enchantment of capitalism, the dominance of market approaches and the emphasis on technologies that they felt were ubiquitous in the Blue Zone and visible, for instance, in the number of fossil fuel industry delegates. These activists' actions were instead aimed at creating mass media attention and self-mediation through social media, where they looked for opportunities to *stage themselves*, either to increase transparency of the working of the governance processes unfolding in the 'In' and the 'Off' or to directly disrupt the "theatre of global climate action" described in section 2. An attempt to 'invade' the climate theatre happening in the 'Off' could be witnessed in a *Toxic Net-Zero Tour* organised by "Europe Calls Out Polluters", during which activists held press conferences in front of or inside pavilions to display their discontent with the scripts of the Paris Agreement. A number of activists live-streamed the event to social media platforms and another activist served as press contact. Activists engaging in these kinds of more *disruptive* action generally refrained from taking part in official events.

## "The most exclusionary COP ever"- A scattered setting for activism



Figure 8: Friday march on the first conference week, streets of Glasgow

Much of the civil society activity on the 'Fringe' was organised within and around the COP26 Coalition and the so-called Climate Fringe. These organisations had intended for a central space near the Blue Zone to act as a main civil society hub, but their plans were thwarted at a late stage, just over a month before the start of COP.<sup>19</sup> This led to a last-minute effort to rent various venues, meaning that civil society actors and activities were distributed across Glasgow without one singular place large enough for everyone to gather. Instead, there were multiple sites that acted as key venues, notably the Landing Hub, located in the vicinity of the Blue Zone, and Adelaide Place Baptist Church (with a maximum capacity of 220). These stages were arranged to serve multiple purposes. In contrast to its UN counterpart, the Landing Hub's art installations, wood chip-floored tents and Portaloos gave it a festival-like feel. The need to produce and proliferate social media-friendly content was satisfied by work from Scottish artist Robert Montgomery, with his "Grace of the Sun", an enormous poem constructed from solar lamps, acting as a focal photo opportunity for

<sup>19</sup> <https://climatefringe.org/hub-update/>

activists. Every evening, from 5 until 7pm, the church hosted the COP26 Coalition Movement Assemblies. A theme was selected for each day to bring a new flavour to the discussions, such as feminism, work and unions, or disability. This series of daily gatherings acted in part as a networking opportunity, in part as a site for the conscious creation of a common narrative for the heterogeneous movements present in Glasgow. Assemblies began with a “report from the inside” by a member of a Blue Zone-accredited NGO, giving a usually damning summary of the day’s topical negotiations and an insight into the situation inside the conference. The COP26 Coalition streamed a daily recap on YouTube for those not able to be in Glasgow in person, pointedly called “Inside Outside”.<sup>20</sup> Each session also acknowledged who was not there, with many references to this being “*the most exclusionary COP ever*”.

The scattered distribution of the physical spaces for the Fringe led to a somewhat disjointed programme. This was not of the utmost importance, however, as for many activists the goal in coming to Glasgow was to be on the streets. For the two weeks of the conference, there were almost daily demonstrations and marches in the city, with XR being notable for sustaining a momentum of actions throughout the week. The first week culminated in two large demonstrations: the FFF rally on 5 November, and the Global Day of Climate Action on 6 November. Friday’s rally attracted around 25,000 participants; these numbers swelled to four times that for the march on Saturday. There were many similarities between these two action days: good-natured, similar chants and banners, many with references to “No more blah blah blah”, paraphrasing the viral speech that Greta Thunberg made in late September. Numerous banners called for “System change not climate change” or expressed determination to “Uproot the system”. Weekday protests mobilised between 100-1,500 participants, averaging around 200-300, and ranged from XR’s small-scale high-drama performances<sup>21</sup> industry – a march highlighting the climate impact of the military and arms industry – leading up to the gates of the local factory of a large armaments manufacturer, and a costume-heavy “Greenwash March”.<sup>22</sup> While the large protest marches followed a “logic of numbers” to attract attention, a “logic of bearing witness” (Uldam 2013) was apparent especially for XR’s actions, which tried to raise media interest through their performativity. Sometimes, they were staged directly in front of the Blue Zone entrance, to counter-script the overarching narrative in the mediated space of the conference. The policing operation was one of the largest ever seen in Britain, with approximately 10,000 officers stationed every day,<sup>23</sup> and English reinforcements supporting the local teams. A dominant narrative theme found at outside protests was the need to convey a sense of urgency, as reflected in the standardised slogans “Act Now” and “Time is running out”. This was echoed by advertising throughout the city and by messaging in a light installation at the entrance to the Blue Zone (“Hurry Up Please It’s Time”). These actions referred to the ‘In’ and served to *monitor* the process, countering the promissory talks. However, in informal meetings, activists reflected on the longer temporal scale of the climate movement (“This is the beginning and not the end”<sup>24</sup>), and the pace of their future vision. Like those on the inside, activists on the outside sometimes positioned themselves as *disruptors*, seeking to contest the staging of solutions to climate change around markets and technological fixes. In other cases, activists

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8pFFiJL09o&list=PLg-Yr6iM4rOjI0ijJ93HArU41G-idVU>

<sup>21</sup> <https://news.stv.tv/west-central/extinction-rebellion-holds-funeral-ceremony-for-cop26-at-necropolis>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/19691751.cop26-greenwash-march-sparks-traffic-chaos-glasgow/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.scotland.police.uk/what-s-happening/news/2021/june/police-scotland-reveals-plans-for-one-of-the-uk-s-biggest-policing-operations-to-support-cop26/>

<sup>24</sup> O\_Fringe\_12.11.2021.



Figure 9: Debate, People's Summit for Climate Justice at Adelaide's Place

sought to *monitor* and hold the proceedings to some level of accountability: for example, when members of XR held up large eyes at the entrance of Glasgow Central Station, to “watch” delegates exiting the station. Again, dramatic stunts like this have (at least) two purposes, with another target being increased media exposure for such an event.

Whilst part of the purpose of the movements’

presence in Glasgow was to express dissent towards the COP, another objective lay almost detached from its proceedings: the aim of connecting and building relationships with other activists. One activist remarked on the difficulty of finding cohesion between the activists on the inside and those on the outside, and reflected that creating the required trust “takes time, it’s a process”<sup>25</sup>. With this goal in mind, the People’s Summit for Climate Justice was held from 7 to 10 November in various locations around Glasgow. It was described as a networking event in which activists could share experiences, educate and work on a shared vision. The Coalition aimed to “provide an alternative to the business-as-usual of inaction, false solutions and lack of ambition of rich nations and corporations.”<sup>26</sup> As expected, the event types were more diverse than in the official conference, including workshops, games and simulations, where additions to existing *repertoires* of contention (McAdam et al. 2001: 41) like the successful court case against Shell in the Netherlands were shared.<sup>27</sup> But the main panel discussions with prominent speakers from political theory, activism or leftist politics, developed dynamics similar to inside panel events, avoiding overly controversial debate and ultimately remaining vague. Processes of *incantation* (Aykut 2021), of a unifying, yet vague counter-narrative, were also markedly present in activist circles including repeated calls for climate justice, ecosocialism or a “*Green New Deal*”, as well as the recognition of intersectionality and Indigenous perspectives. However, positions did not strongly develop or converge over the course of the two weeks. This created some symmetry with the ‘theatre’ happening in the ‘Off’ of the conference.

## “Real zero” instead of “net zero” – counter-scripting Paris

Yet, despite all activists sharing notions of climate justice, more solidarity in economy and society, loss and damage funding for the Global South, and Indigenous rights, a more radical notion of these demands can be distinguished within the broader climate movement discourse. In it, the *script* of the Paris Agreement (1.5°C, net zero, carbon markets, nature-based-solutions and others) is rejected altogether: “Change, like, challenge the narrative of a Net Zero, cause most people hear Net Zero and they think ‘Oh that’s brilliant, net zero’s great’ and we actually have to say ‘well that’s not ambitious enough.’”<sup>28</sup> On this view, net zero

<sup>25</sup> O\_Fringe\_12.11.2021.

<sup>26</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EVzsk1fRU1GXUZwCQHb28J7yMqBGwOL\\_eJZXkO0xBkU/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EVzsk1fRU1GXUZwCQHb28J7yMqBGwOL_eJZXkO0xBkU/edit)

<sup>27</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/peoplessummitpdf>

<sup>28</sup> I\_Off\_03.11.2021.

as a concept opens the door for technical fixes and “false solutions” like climate engineering and further dispossession of indigenous land. This reflects an overall criticism of the COP discourse as business-as-usual, co-optation and “emptying” of key demands of the climate movement. Instead, they demanded other target dates for climate neutrality (2025-2030), “real zero” (as opposed to net zero, meaning the rejection of negative emissions and carbon offsetting), divestment, nature rights and ecocide laws, loss and damage reparations, recognition of debt (instead of funding), and ultimately, overall system change. Strong dualisms are introduced (rich vs. poor, South vs. North, injustice vs. justice, inside vs. outside). In this narrative, trust towards the COP and UNFCCC is very limited, if at all present. These activists’ demand for “real zero” instead of net zero reflects a view of the UNFCCC discourse as one of “climate delay”: in particular, one that delivers more talk than action, uses highly technical language, legitimises continued fossil fuel use and is biased in its optimism about technological and market-based solutions (Lamb et al. 2020).

More moderate positions were represented by the established CAN network, but to a lesser degree also by groups like SCCS and FFF. While they, too, criticised “empty promises”, they refrained from openly questioning the whole Paris architecture, including its polycentric nature, and kept degree targets, net zero or “the science” as their narrative reference points and not outright rejected solutions such as carbon markets and negative emissions technologies. They also acknowledged the general need for COP conferences. Some civil society groups, such as *Germanwatch* and the *WWF*, have evaluated the outcomes of COP26 in a partially positive light, in stark contrast to many radical and even moderate activists, who were highly critical of the COP26 outcomes. This shows that there are still also highly integrated observer NGOs, which (partly) aligned their expectations with the COP process and the Paris script.<sup>29</sup> Despite a widespread recognition amongst activists of the “COP circus” and a sceptical view of the likelihood of progress – in the words of a speaker at the movement assembly on the final day of COP26, “We all knew it was going to be a complete shit show”<sup>30</sup> – it is nonetheless a theatre in which they perform. No matter how critical it may be, the climate movement’s presence at COP acts, to some degree, to legitimise the process. The choice to go to Glasgow was not an obvious one for many activists, and amongst those who did go, there continued to be a discussion on the purpose and validity of the movement’s physical presence. One activist summed up their reasoning as follows: “We have to use every single avenue open to us and this is a big one”<sup>31</sup>.

## Constructing a ‘grassroots globality’ beyond COPs

As the observations presented above show, the tension between distance and engagement previously observed at COP17 and COP21 continues to prevail (Uldam 2013; de Moor 2018). Activists’ engagement gives legitimacy to the stages they appear on, while they feel the need to be present and explain what their concepts mean to them, countering co-optation and the ongoing “emptying” of their key terms. To this end, there was a degree of symmetry between the official COP conference and the alternative activist venues. The movement assemblies in the Climate Fringe in the first week served as backstage, while the People’s Summit and events served as *spaces of incantation* (Aykut 2021) of an overarching narrative and a story of imminent success (“The era of injustice is over”).<sup>32</sup> Activists stated that they felt inspired and reassured by seeing protest action and panel discussions. Despite continued criticism and disillusionment over the COP process and aspirations to construct *alternative globalities* (de Moor 2020), many activists

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<sup>29</sup> <https://germanwatch.org/de/21168> and [https://wwf.panda.org/wwf\\_news/press\\_releases/?4379966/COP26-closing-statement](https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/press_releases/?4379966/COP26-closing-statement)

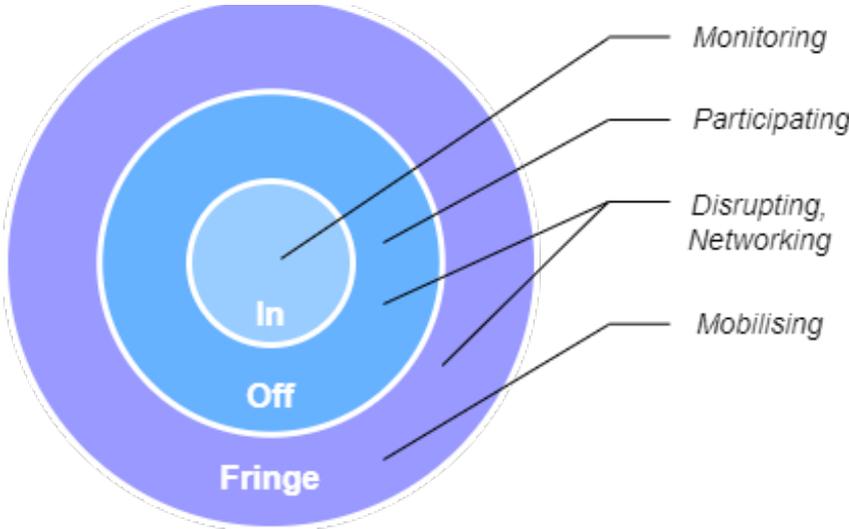
<sup>30</sup> O\_Fringe\_12.11.2021.

<sup>31</sup> I\_Fringe\_09.11.2021.

<sup>32</sup> [https://twitter.com/COP26\\_Coalition/status/1460730591423434752](https://twitter.com/COP26_Coalition/status/1460730591423434752)

apparently still felt the need to be present at COP26, synchronise their activities with the conference, and use the force of attraction of a transnational mega-event. It is yet to be seen whether movement action around COP26 effectively functioned as a galvanising point this time around, after the failure of similar attempts to network and create shared visions at previous COPs (de Moor et al. 2017).

Figure 10: Activists’ practices in the three circles



In all three circles – ‘In’, ‘Off’ and ‘Fringe’ – activists were present with their – moderate or radical – protest practices (Fig. 1): Within the ‘In’, they *monitored* the negotiation process (and its public evaluation) through public pressure to achieve accountability and transparency; in the ‘Off’, they (more or less reluctantly) participated in the polycentric governance space of the Paris Agreement, while still trying to distance themselves discursively, and

partly engaged in disruptive tactics; and lastly, in the ‘Fringe’, they mobilised, networked and at times disrupted to reject the overall process and counter-script the narrative of the Paris Agreement. Monitoring and disrupting sometimes overlapped, as both actions revolved around exploiting mediation opportunities that the COP (and its media coverage) provides, thereby allowing both inside and outside activists to *stage* their different degrees of distance to COP26 in similar ways. Behind these different practices lie different notions of how to bring about social change, from appealing to states and governments to create public pressure, to changing the dominant public narratives and creating relevance within the polycentric space in the ‘Off’, to grassroots mobilisation and allying in the fight against ‘the system’. With the next two COPs taking place in non-democratic countries (Egypt and the UAE), activists’ protest repertoires both ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ will likely be heavily impacted.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the successful creation of a global network of climate movements and increased (self-)mediation (Uldam 2013) will be crucial for activists’ aim of producing *globality* and exploiting the force of attraction that COPs provide, while being physically absent from the conference spaces and host cities.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/21/cop27-is-in-egypt-next-year-but-will-anyone-be-allowed-to-protest>

## CONCLUSION: A new era, or old conflicts in new bottles?

The Glasgow conference relaunched global climate governance after the year 2020 was lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. By finalising the Paris architecture for reporting and review, and by operationalising its carbon trading mechanisms, it represented an important point of passage to a new era of global climate governance. Closing debate on these very contentious issues also opened the space for a series of new and pressing questions. These concern the capacity of a ‘soft’ and bottom-up approach to global cooperation to provide both an effective ratcheting-up of mitigation ambition, and the financial means necessary for low-carbon development and adaptation in the Global South. With respect to ambition, Glasgow saw an unprecedented number of new pledges and sectoral initiatives from states and private actors. While these attracted global media attention and might have provided some momentum for climate talks, they could not gloss over the persistent gap between the submitted NDCs and the reductions needed to meet the Paris goals. Beyond the ambition gap, Glasgow also laid bare a widening trust gap in climate finance delivery, and a growing dissatisfaction among NGOs and social movements with the slow progress and promissory talk at global climate conferences. Our observations of dynamics within and beyond the Blue Zone allow us to identify continuities, but also shifts in global climate politics that became evident in Glasgow. To better understand how these continuities and shifts operated across different spaces of the Glasgow conference, Table 1 provides a synoptic summary of main characteristics of the three circles of global climate governance, in terms of practices, agents, issues, frames and overall narratives.

As social spaces and performative stages, the three circles clearly enact different representations of ‘the global’, and of relevant actors and issues in climate politics. In the ‘In’, states are the main agents, and UN-multilateralism the dominant practice. Here, the global is a construct of negotiations and alliance-building within historically predetermined country blocs. While the Paris turn had somewhat softened that state-centric organisation, the COVID-19 pandemic in many ways signalled the return of a certain conception of the state as a provider of control, security and investment in times of crisis, and therefore of a state-centric geopolitics of the climate crisis. The ‘Off’ provided a different, contrasting imaginary of the globe as a space of harmonious transnational cooperation among a multitude of actors and organisations, including cities, companies, investors, and civil society groups. The global here was not one of negotiations and political division, but of sustainable entrepreneurship, innovation and engagement, animated by a very corporate spirit and capitalist do-it-yourself culture. In the ‘Fringe’, we observed attempts to propose more radical climate solutions, but also to construct an alternative bottom-up globality by building a “movement of movements”. These efforts aim to harness the momentum of recent waves of global mobilisation including Fridays for Future, Black Lives Matter and the Sunrise Movement, but also protests throughout the Global South, such as the Chilean uprising that started in the wake of COP25 in 2019. All in all, the Glasgow conference clearly confirmed that climate conferences are no longer solely, and perhaps no longer primarily, diplomatic arenas in which country representatives craft legal documents. Instead, they have become attractors for new public and private climate policy pledges, transnational initiatives and sectoral climate clubs. Moreover, the Paris architecture of pledges, reporting and review is clearly toothless without the continuous scrutiny of scientists and think tanks, and the public attention created by NGOs, social movements and media. But global civil society is not only key in supporting the Paris architecture; it is also crucial in attracting attention to issues left out of climate talks and private initiatives, questioning the direction taken by the climate regime, and proposing alternative solutions, narratives and policy frames. Taken together, the above points to an increasing importance of ‘The Off’ or the second circle of climate conferences, the broader set of UN spaces open to accredited participants and observers. This importance in turn calls for observing questions of access, influence and accountability in these arenas: which actors get the possibility to expose their solutions and proposals? Who sets new themes, who opens, frames and closes debates? What type of climate politics emerges as a result?

Table 1: The Three Circles of Global Climate Governance

Circle	Practices	Main Agents	Policy issues	Dominant frames	Overall narrative(s)
<b>IN</b> (inner circle)  <i>“The spirit of New York”</i>	Negotiating text, Assessing progress, Showcasing success, Raising the alarm, Lobbying, Monitoring, Media reporting	State delegates, Observers (esp. NGOs, business, scientists), media (in the hallways)	Paris rulebook, Global Stocktake, Carbon markets, Climate finance, Adaptation, Loss & Damage, Fossil fuels	Ambition gap, Trust gap, Historical responsibility, Just transition, Climate neutrality	Operating a low-carbon transition and adapting in an unequal world.  Assuring global development within a shrinking carbon budget.
<b>OFF</b> (official side-events and exhibits)  <i>“The spirit of Davos”</i>	Showcasing best practices, Advertising, Storytelling, Networking, Lobbying, Raising the alarm, Assessing progress, Contesting, Watching, Media reporting	Business & city leaders, Politicians, Experts and scientists, NGOs and Activists, Media, Youth, Religious organisations	Renewables, Nuclear, CCS, Carbon markets, Finance, Agriculture, Resilience, Incentives, Regulation, Nature-based solutions, Oceans	Net zero, Climate justice, Shifting the trillions, Capacity-building, Access, Adaptation, Food security	Mobilizing all sectors of global society to build a green world economy.  Building momentum for cooperation and climate action.
<b>FRINGE</b> (unofficial happenings and events)  <i>“The spirit of Porto Alegre”</i>	Demonstrating, Disrupting, Networking, Monitoring, Counter-scripting, Showcasing alternatives, Organizing exhibits & events, Media reporting	Movements & activists, NGOs, Left / green politicians, Intellectuals, Media, Artists & exhibitors	Greenwashing, Reparations for Loss & Damage, Green New Deal, Indigenous rights, Gender, Ecocide, Divestment	Climate Justice, Real Zero, Just transition, Intersectionality, System change, Ecosocialism	Achieving deep decarbonization and climate justice through grass-roots mobilisation.  Winning political power to overcome the (capitalist) system.

Within all three spaces, new dividing lines were laid down, but old conflicts raised their heads anew. In the negotiations, the shift to implementation foregrounds two main lines of conflict. These concern, first, the speed of decarbonisation in different areas of the world. The remaining carbon space to keep the Paris goals within reach is rapidly shrinking. It is clear that the combination of rich countries’ failure to decarbonise rapidly enough with the drive towards (still largely carbon-intensive) development in emerging economies will increasingly conflict with the urgency to phase out high-carbon technologies. Second, questions of climate finance occupied centre stage at COP26, and will continue to do so in the next years, as discussions of a global goal for adaptation and a financial mechanism for loss and damage continue. While the finance issue reactivates old conflicts along the North-South divide, the dwindling carbon budget opens a line of conflict between the big emitters in both the global North and South, on one side, and vulnerable countries in the rest of the world, on the other. The second of these conflicts might prove more consequential in the near future. This became clear at the end of the conference, when India was blamed for watering down the reference to the coal phase-out in the Glasgow Pact. Clearly, however, India was not alone. It was supported among others by diplomatic heavy weights such as China, South Africa and Nigeria, which share its concerns with differentiation and the transitional use of coal. As

pressure on these countries to accelerate their transition increases and pressure on the Global North to provide adequate amounts of climate finance grows at the same pace, the modalities of the Glasgow compromise could well become an unfortunate blueprint for future conflicts. Prepared by the US-China Joint Declaration from 10 November, the compromise clearly centred on the interests of developed countries in avoiding financial commitments and of emerging economies in self-determination with regard to the pace and forms of their decarbonization. Smaller developing countries are clearly the weak element in this new climate geopolitics. Accordingly, compromises among the large historic and future emitters risk systematically running against their interests, by easing the pressure to reduce emissions for one side, and to provide finance for the other. It is these conflicts that will underlie the continuing importance of the negotiations, the first of our three circles, after COP26. However, carbon-intensive states may well have an interest in attracting attention away from the 'In', and onto the 'Off', in a context where the moral and potentially also the legal case for the demands of the most vulnerable countries will continue to gain traction as the world approaches the 1.5°C warming threshold.

The 'Off' in Glasgow was characterised by massive participation on the part of accredited observers, but also by the unprecedentedly massive presence of fossil fuel interests. While widely criticised, this presence nonetheless provided strong evidence for the continued importance of climate conferences, and also of their second circle within the UN Blue Zone and the Green Zone. We should not be distracted by the popular circus metaphors, or by the nature of events in these spaces. Climate conferences represent moments of temporary densification of global climate politics, which crystallise discourses on the causes of problems as well as conflicts over possible solutions. What was striking in Glasgow, compared to previous conferences, was how little the structure of the global economy, or of financialized capitalism, was questioned in these spaces. Instead, markets and finance were almost unanimously re-enchanting as solutions to the climate crisis. What we see here may well be one of the main problems with the 'Paris prophecy' - an approach that aimed to resuscitate a moribund climate diplomacy by foregrounding private and subnational climate action and by bringing in firms and investors to create momentum. "Greenwashing is the new climate denial": this quip by one of the architects of the Paris approach (Laurence Tubiana) illustrates growing concern that the UNFCCC might increasingly represent a stage for fossil fuel solutionism and technological optimism, possibly even contributing to climate delay instead of facilitating the required climate action (Lamb et al. 2020: 4). This being said, the flurry of pledges and initiatives launched in Glasgow does provide some reason for hope. It represents the 'sectoral turn' in global climate governance long advocated by climate policy scholars (e.g. Oberthür et al. 2021). Attention should therefore be devoted to the formalisation and implementation of these initiatives. This means, for instance, establishing clear criteria for membership, duties for participants, regular meetings and an organisational support structure. Keeping track of processes of formalisation would also make it more difficult for actors at future climate conferences to sell old wine in new bottles by rebranding existing initiatives or recycling old pledges.

In part due to this contradictory mixture of changes, climate activists and civil society organisations on 'the Fringe' of the conference appeared to find it ever more difficult to navigate the tension between proximity to and distance from the UN process. Aware of their increasing importance for the governance process, some tried raising the bar on ambition and implementation by campaigning for a "real zero" transformation. Others, more critical of the process, denounced the presence of corporate actors, the overall hegemony of capitalist frames and solutions, and the increasing reliance on performance and communication in the UN arena. At the same time, COPs present a unique structure of "mediation opportunities" (Uldam 2013) for activists to increase their scope and visibility, strategically influence governance institutions or voice counter-narratives to global publics, and build coalitions between different movement factions. Contentious practices inside and outside the Blue Zone frequently aimed at exploiting these mediation opportunities by using performative strategies themselves, e.g. when activists

invaded stages in the Blue Zone to create iconic pictures for global media outlets. More disruptive forms of protest were not less 'theatrical' and often relied on communication via social media. In the struggle for a unifying counter-narrative, activists used a variety of slogans and demands, including calls for intersectionality, indigenous rights and a Green New Deal, but also for system change and green socialism. While climate justice constituted a rallying cry among different factions of the climate movement, the question of what position to take vis-à-vis the UN regime remained controversial. The call for real zero seemed to provide a new common ground across the more radical groups that are critical of the Paris process, but it remained contested among the breadth of the movement. It marks a break from a language of "net zero" perceived as increasingly emptied out by ambiguous and inconsequential pledges by countries and corporations.

In sum, global climate politics has entered a new and contradictory phase, in which the need for deep transformation is seemingly acknowledged within a very broad mainstream of political and corporate elites. Attention is shifting towards actual implementation and with it to concrete technologies and solutions. At the same time, Glasgow clearly saw the resurfacing of well-known oppositions and conflicts: between countries from the global North and the global South, between ideas of an ecological modernisation through markets and a just transformation driven by civil society, between reformist and system change approaches. Within the UN space, the low-carbon transition is increasingly portrayed as a matter of business, technology and markets. With climate movements reacting to this with a more anti-systemic narrative, this demarcates a new phase from the discourse of "start acting" to one of "how to act". At the same time, the boundaries between the different spaces, or circles, of climate governance are becoming increasingly blurred: private actors are included in pledge and review; NGOs and think tanks are addressed as governance actors with a crucial role in implementation; slogans from activist discourses, from system change to just transition, find their way into speeches from UN officials and corporate representatives. Behind this apparent convergence, there is an evident risk of these terms being emptied of meaning as they become part of political communication and corporate marketing strategies. Practices of bordering and exclusion, co-optation and greenwashing as well as corporate takeover in the Blue and Green Zones, indicate clear limits on convergence between the different social forces at play in global climate politics within the current governance paradigm. This also concerns the future of the COP process. Despite some positive results from the Glasgow negotiations and some encouraging signals in the form of sectoral initiatives, emissions have been rising steeply again after the 2020 COVID-19 slowdown. Without increasing scrutiny of public and private net-zero pledges, a decisive push to formalise and extend sectoral initiatives, as well as a new climate realpolitik based on financial solidarity with vulnerable countries and massive investments in low-carbon development in the global South, there is a serious risk that UN climate governance will be progressively hollowed out, as climate impacts increase around the world and climate-themed protests, including protests *against* rising energy prices and other consequences of unjust climate policies, intensify.

## Acknowledgement

This work was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy – EXC 2037 'CLICCS - Climate, Climatic Change, and Society' – Project Number: 390683824, a contribution to the Center for Earth System Research and Sustainability (CEN) of Universität Hamburg. We are grateful to two reviewers and to the participants of the research seminar "Neues aus der sozialwissenschaftlichen Klimaforschung" at Universität Hamburg for valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper. Special thanks to Paul Reeve, whose proofreading not only improved the language, but also the content of the article.

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