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COP 26 Outcomes and Opportunities for Saudi Arabia and Other Arab Countries

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Instant Insight

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COP 26 Delivered on Most Expectations

The 2021 Glasgow Climate Change Conference, also known as COP 26, took place at a difficult juncture. Countries are still struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences. The concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere continue to rise, and extreme weather events are compounding socioeconomic vulnerabilities across the world (WMO 2021).

Despite this, the conference in Glasgow met its two broad mandated objectives. It finalized the implementation guidelines for the 2015 Paris Agreement, and it reviewed the progress and cooperation in addressing climate change that has taken place since the previous COP in 2019. On the first objective, it delivered sufficiently robust guidance for international carbon markets and for reporting on emissions and climate finance. It also set in place mechanisms to support participation by developing countries in both areas. On the second objective, it shed light on the major gaps between the climate financing promised, what is needed and what has actually been delivered. It also similarly put forward processes to drive further support to developing countries as they reduce emissions, adapt to climate change and cope with the irreversible loss and damage caused by it.

A third objective of COP 26 was set externally, as it was not on the formal negotiating agenda: the 2021 conference was broadly seen as a litmus test for the Paris Agreement's ability to deliver higher ambition on climate action and support. It was a moment of taking stock on whether the agreement's first five-year round of national climate plan updates would, as the COP Presidency framed it, "keep the 1.5°C goal alive" (Sharma 2021). In this area, assessments of success were varied, with the most optimistic suggesting the world would now be on track to limit global warming to 1.8°C (Hausfather and Forster 2021). Others pointed out that if only pledges that are enshrined in plans countries have formally submitted to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) are counted, the total impact would be 2.4°C, which still is a significant improvement compared with 2015 (Hausfather and Forster 2021).

This Instant Insight briefly unpacks the main COP 26 outcomes of relevance for Saudi Arabia and its neighboring region. It then digs deeper into what is needed next from countries in the region to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement, and specifically what early action could help seize opportunities, both from the operationalization of the new international market mechanisms and from the fact that the next two COPs will be hosted in the Arab region.

Key Outcomes for Saudi Arabia and the Region

COP 26 was expected to deliver in three areas: its first goal was to finalize the so-called Paris 'rulebook.' The second was to continue its review and strengthening of the implementation of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement, particularly around issues of importance to developing countries. The third was to send signals to the world about countries' high collective ambition and determination to keep temperature rise below commonly agreed limits.[1]

The Paris 'Rulebook'

Under the intergovernmental negotiations track, which involves 196 countries and operates on a consensus mechanism, COP 26 was expected to deliver agreements on parts of the Paris Agreement's implementation guidelines that previous COPs had not been able to finalize. Most of the 'rulebook' had been agreed to at COP 24 in Katowice, Poland, in 2018. This included, for example, guidelines on the types of information that countries should include in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs — medium-term plans countries submit to the UNFCCC every five years). It also included how the agreement's implementation and compliance committee would work and how the Global Stocktake (a process taking place every five years to gauge where the world stands compared with the Paris Agreement's goals) would be conducted (UNFCCC 2018).

On Paris Agreement guidance and rules, COP 26 delivered what can be characterized as a sufficiently robust set of decisions, including on:

- Common reporting formats for tracking countries' GHG emissions, NDC implementation and support for developing countries under the Paris Agreement's enhanced transparency framework;
- Guidance and rules for two international market mechanisms and a work program for non-market approaches under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement;
- Common time frames for NDCs (starting from 2025); and
- Public registries for recording NDCs and adaptation communications (which convey countries' adaptation priorities, plans, actions and support needs).

Reviewing and Strengthening Implementation

Given the one-year delay, the COP 26 also had a long list of tasks related to reviewing the implementation of the three international climate treaties – the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement – and strengthening them through new processes and provisions. The negotiating agendas under these three treaties, along with two subsidiary bodies that support their work, included more than 30 (sub-)items related to adaptation and climate finance. These are two crucial issues for developing countries, along with loss and damage (unavoidable climate impacts) and broader issues of support (technology and capacity building).[2] While these issues have received increasing attention in recent COP agendas, developing countries still generally feel that insufficient attention is being paid to them. In many areas, developing countries see a wide gap between their true needs and what the convention can deliver, or what developed countries have promised to deliver.

COP 26 delivered decisions that help raise or maintain the profile of these issues, such as:

- A two-year work program on the Paris Agreement's global goal on adaptation;
- An agreement on new ways to keep track of whether developed countries deliver on their collective climate finance mobilization target of US$100 billion per year in 2020–2025; and
- A three-year work program to negotiate a new collective quantitative climate finance goal by 2024.

In addition, two so-called cover decisions under the COP and the Paris Agreement's governing body CMA, which provide an overview of the main issues agreed, introduced some new elements, including:

- A three-year "dialogue" to discuss funding arrangements for loss and damage; and
- "Urging" developed countries to deliver urgently on the US$100 billion goal and at least double their collective adaptation finance by 2025 compared with 2019 levels.

From developing countries' perspective climate finance delivered weaker outcomes than hoped for. A report by the OECD (2021) concluded, before COP 26, that developed countries had mobilized US$79.6 billion in climate finance in 2019. Some new pledges were made during the COP, and the cover decisions welcomed an informal climate finance delivery plan that developed countries had published in the run-up to the COP. This plan sets a goal of reaching the US$100 billion target by 2023 (Wilkinson and Flasbarth 2021).

On loss and damage, small island states and the Least Developed Countries were left particularly unhappy as their proposal, which was supported by all developing countries, had been to establish a financing facility for loss and damage. This issue is expected to re-emerge at the next COP.

Raising Ambition

The Paris Agreement mandates that countries communicate increasingly ambitious NDCs every five years. The year 2020 was the first milestone in this cycle.[3] The COVID-19 pandemic meant that both COP 26 and many NDC submissions were delayed from 2020 to 2021. However, the formal, intergovernmental negotiation track did not have a mandated space at COP 26 for taking a "temperature check" of countries' mitigation pledges. Previous COPs had simply mandated a synthesis report from the UNFCCC Secretariat on the estimated temperature impacts of new and updated NDCs submitted in the run-up to the COP.

At the same time, pressure was growing to show that the Paris Agreement's "ratchet up mechanism" (periodic NDC updates informed by periodic Global Stocktakes of collective progress) was working despite the effects of the pandemic. In the run-up to COP 26, calls from the UN Secretary-General and the incoming COP 26 Presidency, among others, grew for all countries to update their NDCs by Glasgow (UN 2021; Sharma 2021). In parallel, a trend of adopting mid-century net-zero emissions targets also became prominent. Net-zero targets are not formally required by the Paris Agreement, which only calls for "long-term low GHG emission development strategies," but they are increasingly seen as key to reaching particularly the lower range of the agreement's temperature goals. By mid-October 2021, 140 countries had submitted new or updated NDCs, and 65 had announced mid-century net-zero targets (Fransen 2021).

During the COP, only six countries announced new/updated NDCs. However, in high-level events that took place at the COP, there were several further announcements. For instance, India announced a net-zero carbon emissions target for 2070. In total, by the end of COP 26, 79 countries had set a net-zero target for 2030–2070, via a declaration, policy document or law (ECIU et al. 2021).

A new Global Methane Pledge, with more than 100 participating countries, including Saudi Arabia and six other Arab countries, was also launched. This pledge sets a collective goal of reducing emissions from methane (a potent GHG that can often be mitigated cost-effectively) by 30% by 2030 compared with 2020 levels (European Commission 2021). Some estimate reaching this goal could shave off 0.1°C from expected global warming (Hausfather and Forster 2021).

Researchers and international agencies estimate that, if fully implemented, the NDCs submitted by early November 2021 would lead to a global temperature rise of 2.4°C. If countries' net-zero pledges are included, temperature rise could be limited to 1.8°C by the end of the century (Hausfather and Forster 2021). This marks a notable improvement over the estimated impact of 3.0°C after the first round of NDCs in 2015 (UNEP 2016). At the same time, however, many have drawn attention to the lack of detailed implementation strategies to reach countries' net-zero targets, or even their NDCs (UNEP 2021; Climate Action Tracker 2021). Moreover, global emissions have yet to start falling. In October 2021, the World Meteorological Organization (2021) announced that global mean temperatures had reached 1.1°C above pre-industrial levels.

In the two COP and CMA cover decisions, calls and processes put in place to promote higher mitigation ambition include:

- A new reference to "resolving" to pursue efforts to limit temperature rise to 1.5°C (representing a strengthening of language from the Paris Agreement, which only "aimed" to do this);
- A new work program to "urgently scale up mitigation ambition and implementation" in the next decade, details of which will decided at COP 27;
- A call for countries that have not yet updated their NDCs to do so, and a request for countries to strengthen their 2030 NDC targets by the end of 2022;
- Annual NDC synthesis updates and high-level ministerial roundtables on pre-2030 ambition;
- A call for all countries to communicate their long-term low GHG emission development strategies by COP 27; and
- New operative references to just transitions, net-zero emissions, phasing down unabated coal power, phasing out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies and reducing methane and other non-carbon dioxide GHG emissions by 2030.

From the perspective of developing countries, higher mitigation ambition and action are conditioned by support, which means that this, along with the issues related to finance, adaptation and loss and damage discussed above, will also remain highly intertwined going forward.

Next Steps Needed and Opportunities to Be Seized

What is needed next from Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to support the implementation of the Paris Agreement? What voluntary mechanisms are there where opportunities can be seized, including by taking early action? And how could the region support the next COPs that will be hosted in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), respectively?

Based on a division of countries dating back to 1992 into developed and developing countries (Annex and non-Annex I), Saudi Arabia and all countries in the Arab and Middle East and North Africa regions are classified as developing (non-Annex I) countries. The UNFCCC revolves around the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC). This principle recognizes that while all countries have a shared obligation to address climate change, they are not equally responsible for the problem (Luomi 2020). Developed countries are expected to take the lead in reducing their emissions and are required to help developing countries by providing and mobilizing climate finance and other forms of support.

One of the major innovations of the Paris Agreement is that many (but not all) of its provisions apply to all countries. This new approach, which some call "self-differentiation," means that, in practice, many elements in the Agreement and its implementing decisions are either not strictly compulsory (indicated with language such as "should," "urges" or "encourages" instead of "shall," which constitutes a legal obligation) or contain flexibility provisions for developing countries.[4] The decisions adopted at COP 26 create a number of tasks for all countries, the most relevant of which for Saudi Arabia and the Arab region are discussed below.

1. Adaptation Communications by 2022

The CMA cover decision from COP 26 "requests parties that have not yet done so to submit their adaptation communications" by November 2022. The Paris Agreement has a provision on adaptation communications, according to which "each party should, as appropriate, submit and update periodically" (UNFCCC 2015, Article 4.10). An adaptation communication is a planning document that can help increase the visibility of countries' actions and plans, thereby helping attract support when needed. As of mid-November 2021, two Arab countries (Lebanon and Mauritania) had submitted an adaptation communication (UNFCCC 2021b). Adaptation communications can be submitted as part of NDCs or another UNFCCC reporting vehicle, such as a national communication (which contains information on a country's GHG emissions and the steps taken to implement the convention; UNFCCC 2015, Article 4.11).

2. Low GHG Development Strategies by 2022

The CMA cover decision also "urges parties that have not yet done so to communicate [by COP 27] long-term low GHG development strategies," as per Article 4.19 of the Paris Agreement. At the time of writing, in late November 2021, only 44 countries (none of which are from the Arab region) had communicated this strategy to the UNFCCC Secretariat (UNFCCC 2021c).

Countries from the Arab region could show leadership in this area by submitting detailed long-term GHG strategies in 2022. The format of these is flexible: the UNFCCC does not establish specific guidance or require long-term strategies to include a net-zero target, for example. While NDCs, which contain countries' GHG targets, usually also spell out what policies and measures countries intend to implement over the next decade, most net-zero announcements have not been accompanied by roadmaps or more detailed implementation strategies. They are, however, considered crucial both for sending the right signals to investors and markets, and for ensuring countries meet their self-established targets.

3. Biennial Transparency Reporting Starting by 2024

'Transparency' under the Paris Agreement refers to regular emissions reports submitted by countries to the UNFCCC to give clarity about how they are tracking toward their own NDCs. It also helps gauge what support developing countries need to fulfil their NDC ambitions and what support developed countries have provided and mobilized. Transparency is crucial for building trust among countries. UNFCCC transparency reports can also support countries in taking more effective domestic climate action and enable them to participate in international carbon markets.

In the pre-Paris world, developed and developing countries reported to the UNFCCC under different guidelines and systems. Developing countries were expected to report on their emissions only every four years and, in most cases, inventories submitted were outdated, which meant they were not useful for informing policymaking.

Under the Paris Agreement's enhanced transparency framework, all countries are obliged to report on their GHG emissions and progress made on implementing their NDC every two years, starting from 2024. The reports will undergo a technical expert review and will be presented and discussed at UNFCCC meetings. In addition, the reports should include information on climate change impacts and adaptation, and developing countries are expected to report on the support they need and have received to implement their NDCs.[5]

COP 26 agreed to common formats for these biennial reports in terms of documenting emissions, actions and support needed/received or provided/mobilized. If developing countries have capacity constraints relating to specific areas of the reporting tables, they have one or more 'flexibility' options. They are also entitled to support (including capacity building) to implement these reporting obligations. One example is the Global Environment Facility's Capacity-building Initiative for Transparency, which is already supporting 75 countries in building their technical capacity and institutional arrangements (GEF 2021).

Countries now have three years until the first biennial transparency reports are due. The UNFCCC Secretariat has been tasked with developing the required reporting software by 2023 and providing related training and technical support for countries. However, it will be up to the countries themselves to set up governance systems (building on existing ones), train or re-train experts, and collect, verify and present data in the required formats. The earlier that countries begin preparations at the national level, the better positioned they will be to take advantage of the international market mechanisms under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement.

4. Early Measures to Engage with Article 6 Opportunities

COP 26 also agreed on the guidance for implementing and operationalizing two approaches to voluntary market-based cooperation and for a work program for non-market approaches under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. The main purpose of these is to enable international cooperation to help countries implement their NDCs in the most cost-effective way and to raise ambition over time.

The first set of guidance applies to market-based cooperative approaches (Article 6.2), under which countries can, for example, link their existing emissions trading schemes or establish other types of crediting agreements (e.g., Japan's Joint Crediting Mechanism or Switzerland's bilateral agreements with Peru and several other countries). In order to engage in activities under Article 6.2, countries are required to, among other things, have in place arrangements for authorizing the use of internationally traded mitigation outcomes (ITMOs) and have submitted the most recent national GHG inventory report (with the first one being due in 2024). Countries must also submit an initial report detailing information such as their ITMO metrics (e.g., carbon dioxide equivalent) and the corresponding adjustment methods (e.g., a multi-year emissions trajectory for single-year NDCs) they have applied, and they must submit annual information on authorized ITMOS and GHG emissions.

The Article 6.4 market mechanism is, in many ways, similar to the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism, as it is a centralized mechanism governed under the UNFCCC, which also delivers adaptation finance to developing countries through a share of proceeds from the sales of credits under the mechanism. Emissions accounting for Article 6.4 credits is aligned with Article 6 (because Article 6.4 credits are also considered as ITMOs under Article 6.2, if authorized by the host country). Article 6.4 credits that are not authorized by the host country for transfer can be used in domestic schemes, for climate finance or on the voluntary carbon market.

Article 6 requires a corresponding adjustment for all ITMOs (i.e., avoiding double counting of emissions reductions under two jurisdictions), which also applies to credits from voluntary carbon markets. Credits traded on the voluntary carbon market can therefore also become ITMOs, if authorized by the host country. Some expect a two-tier market to emerge, with "adjusted credits" and "non-adjusted credits," where companies looking for "credible" offsets (with no double claiming of reductions) would increase the demand for credits under Article 6.2 and Article 6.4 with a corresponding adjustment (e.g., Favasuli 2021).

Full operationalization of the Article 6.4 mechanism and the setting up of many other cooperative market approaches under Article 6.2 and non-market approaches under Article 6.8 will still take some time.[6] However, the sooner countries put in place related institutional and emissions measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) systems and the implementing capacity, the better placed they will be to engage. Proactively raising awareness among businesses and the private sector about the opportunities of international carbon markets can also help reap the full benefits of these approaches.

5. Support for COP 27 and COP 28

Initial ideas for how Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries can support the COPs in Egypt and the UAE include:

> Explore ways to raise emissions reduction/avoidance ambition in the region under the circular carbon economy framework by promoting knowledge exchanges, joint studies, R&D, and/or pilot projects among multiple stakeholders from the region, particularly around hydrogen and carbon capture and storage and utilization (CCUS) technologies, which still require support to become scalable and move to markets.

> Support regional clean technology business networks and encourage their active participation at both COPs.

> Foster regional networks of researchers specializing in climate science, economics and policy, and create platforms for showcasing climate science and research from the region around and at the two COPs.

> Build on the above-mentioned knowledge networks to strengthen the Global Stocktake, which will kickstart in 2022 and conclude in the UAE in 2023, through inputs from the region.

- Actively support the negotiations under the two-year Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the global goal on adaptation, which will report on its work to COP 28 in the UAE, and the three-year *ad hoc* work program on the new collective quantified goal on climate change, which will conclude at COP 29 in 2024.

- Nominate National Focal Points for Action for Climate Empowerment (education, training and public awareness) to promote and coordinate the implementation of the new 10-year work program agreed to in Glasgow and to seize regional cooperation opportunities in this area.

- Share success stories on strengthening resilience to the negative impacts of climate change response measures from the region at both COPs.

From Ambition to Action

COP 26 maintained the credibility of the Paris Agreement as a universal climate governance treaty that is inclusive and helps ratchet up ambition regarding both climate action and support. The process leading up to COP 26 also greatly raised the ambition of countries' medium- and long-term emissions targets and delivered some improvements in climate finance pledges.

This Instant Insight has offered some initial pointers for where work on laying the foundations for data-driven climate policy and regional cooperation could be strengthened over the next two years.

Many Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, submitted more ambitious NDCs in 2020–2021, which now need to be implemented. Tracking progress toward 2030, 2050 or 2060 requires robust MRV systems. These also serve as the basis for participating in international carbon markets under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. Early movers will reap the most benefits.

The two forthcoming UNFCCC COPs will be organized in the Arab region, which provides a number of opportunities for the region to raise the profile of issues it considers important and to showcase ambition and action on the ground.[7]

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Endnotes

[1] The decisions adopted at COP 26 (UNFCCC 2021a) are used throughout the paper as a reference.

[2]The issue of response measures, namely the negative economic or other effects of countries' climate actions, including to reduce fossil fuel consumption, is another key concern for many developing countries. The Paris Agreement includes provisions on response measures, and a dedicated forum and committee are focused on this matter. Decisions from COP 26 included adopting revised rules of procedure for the committee and providing guidance on the organization of events and related submissions of views under the forum's workplan.

[3]The outcome decision of the 2015 Paris Agreement had requested that countries either update or communicate their NDCs by 2020 (UNFCCC 2015, decision paragraphs 23–24).

[4]The Paris Agreement provides developing countries with the flexibility to take increasingly ambitious action, based on their evolving capacities and national circumstances. At the same time, it upholds the Convention's principles that developed countries "should continue taking the lead" in mitigation (reducing emissions) and developing countries "shall" receive support to unlock more ambitious actions (UNFCCC 2015, Article 4).

[5] Developed countries, in turn, are required to report on support (finance, technology and capacity building) provided to developing countries and to undergo a technical expert review on these reports.

[6] The work program on non-market approaches under the new Glasgow Committee will start in 2022.

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