**2021 A turning point for climate change?**

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Climate-related natural disasters (such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires), a deadly virus, economic collapse, and rising inequalities have all presented extraordinary challenges to the world and have made 2020 a disastrous year for our planet. On December 12, 2020, the Climate Ambition Summit took place online to mark the 5 th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Leaders from 61 countries participated in the event. Back in December, 2015, the pledges made by the leading economies were not sufficient and a global warming range of 2.7 o Celsius (C) to 3.7 o C was projected, based on the emission reduction goals under the Agreement. This year, however, the participants of the Ambition Summit reaffirmed 2 o C as the upper limit for global warming for this century, and pledged more earnest goals. The event saw 45 new and enhanced commitments from governments and NGOs, 24 pledges for net-zero emissions, and 20 new adaptation and resilience plans.

After the USA withdrew from the Paris Agreement in 2017 under President Trump, it seemed unlikely that the Paris goals would be achieved. Progress in the last few months, however, in the form of new pledges made by world leaders, has been encouraging. In September this year, China, the largest emitter of greenhouse emissions in the world, pledged carbon neutrality by 2060. Joe Biden, President Elect of the second largest emitter in the world, has promised that the USA will rejoin the Paris Agreement and renew its pledge of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The President Elect has also promised the launch of the 1.7 trillion-dollar Green Spending Program and has an ambitious Build Back Better Program with climate-friendly nuclear energy and planting-trees policies. Following the USA’s example, Japan, South Korea, Canada, and South Africa have also announced net-zero emissions by the year 2050. As part of its economic revival plan, the EU has already presented a half a trillion-dollar package for renewable energy, electric cars, and other eco-friendly projects.

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The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, has also pledged to mitigate the effects of climate change in the country, through such nature-based measures as planting trees and protecting national parks. He has also promised 60% clean energy and 30% of cars being electric in the country by 2030. A commitment has also been made to move away from fossil fuel for energy generation.

In view of the pledges made by world leaders in recent months and positive news from experts, there is growing hope that 2021 may prove to be a turning point for climate change. Professor Niklas Hohne of the New Climate Institute, who has been contributing to climate change analysis for many years, sees the last few months as a welcome surprise: “…for us it’s unusual to have positive news,” he says. Climate scientists and policy experts at the Climate Action Tracker estimate that if countries deliver on their emission-reduction pledges, the planet could attain 2.1 o C global warming and put the goal of limiting average temperature rise to between 2 o C and 1.5 o C within reach.

The non-zero targets by countries like China and the EU are a breakthrough, and are likely to have other countries vying for bringing about an escalation of net-zero emission commitments and more ambitious decarbonisation plans. The outlook is also likely to improve as a result of technological changes, decreasing renewable energy costs, and widespread use of electric vehicles.

Nevertheless, there is a long way to go with 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions still to be covered by zero emissions, and fossil fuel dependent economies, like Russia, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Iran, likely to hold out against ambitious decarbonisation goals. Moreover, setting targets and making pledges do not always mean action on the ground. Execution of a net-zero plan presents huge challenges, as short-term climate policies in many countries may not be aligned with their long-term emission targets. Political consensus on climate change is also fragile, as the decision by President Trump to withdraw from the Paris Accord has demonstrated.

Moreover, net-zero emission targets may not be enough, and countries may need to go to net-negative emissions beyond 2050 and to some effective negative emission technologies that would remove carbon dioxide directly from the atmosphere.

The success of the UN Climate Change Conference (UNCCC COP 26) in November, 2021, in Glasgow, depends on how many countries come up with ambitious climate plans to support the Paris Agreement. Countries should not be complacent, and should pursue aggressive policies to avert a climate catastrophe.

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