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Headline: Of COPs and cop-outs

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As I write this, COP26, which stands for the 26th annual meeting of the nations which are signatories of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), had just concluded.

Historically, the COPs have been a mixed bag of hits and misses. Since the first COP about 30 years ago, significant progress has arguably been made in reining in a warming planet. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol was launched, signaling the first serious attempt at global mitigation action. In 2015, a paradigm shift occurred with the conception of the Paris Agreement. The agreement is voluntary, and rich and developing nations alike are mandated to declare their so-called “nationally determined contribution” (NDC) to reduce greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. In addition, whereas Kyoto was heavily tilted toward mitigation, Paris broadened the scope of adaptation and finance.

The latest COP can boast of several milestones; some may even be historic. For the first time in a COP text, the Glasgow Climate Pact recognizes the need for “accelerating efforts towards the phasedown of unabated coal power and phase-out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies.” The agreement by several nations to curb methane emissions by 30 percent and halt deforestation by 2030 is laudable. Similarly, the promise to mobilize trillions of dollars of investments to private companies aiming for net-zero emissions is mouth-watering.

But perhaps the pact’s most significant achievement is simply keeping the target of 1.5 degrees Celsius alive, albeit barely. Incidentally, the UK government must be congratulated for its heroic efforts to host (in partnership with Italy) the much-delayed COP26.

While each meeting of the parties has steadily advanced climate action, COPs are also known for their cop-outs. That is, failing to do what they were supposed to do. The banging of the figurative gavel to signal the end of a COP is inevitably followed by wailing and weeping because of what should have been. Indeed, the ink of the Glasgow Pact is not even dry and it is already being hammered for its letdowns. For example, instead of phasing out coal, the pact watered it down to “phasedown” (at the instigation of China and India). In addition, the current NDC pledges are projected to lead to more than 2 degrees Celsius of warming by 2100.

For the Philippines, COP26 could be a harbinger of new opportunities to build climate resilience. Efforts to conserve and restore our natural forests and their biodiversity could benefit from the pledge to halt deforestation. Steps to double adaptation finance to \$40 billion by 2025 could help capacitate more of our most vulnerable sectors. Private companies who commit to net-zero emissions may receive a fresh infusion of investments.

In the end, COP26 lived up to expectations when viewed in the historical arc of previous COPs. It did not solve all the problems, but it laid a foundation upon which future negotiations could build. Given what is at stake, that is good enough.

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