

## Politics: How prepared is the international community to address the current environmental crisis?

### Introduction

As 2021 joins the top 7 warmest years on record, the international response to the environmental crisis has become important than ever. The worldwide population is increasingly invested in environmental-based politics, and electorates find themselves looking into environmental policy as a key factor of how they cast their vote; in some instances valuing the environment over issues such as the economy, education and immigration<sup>1</sup>. As a result of this growing passion for environmental protection, it seems that politicians are now forced to take action and tailor their policy to benefit the environment if they wish to hold onto their positions of governance moving forward.

The term ‘preparedness’ can be defined as the ability to implement changes to improve the current environmental situation, but also, in part, the willingness to act and reform systems for the benefit of the environment. Although the international community has acknowledged the severity of the situation that needs to be faced, the global preparation to address this environmental crisis remains too insignificant and stagnant for effective change.

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<sup>1</sup>The Independent. (2019). *Voters care more about the environment than the economy, poll finds*. [online] Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/general-election-latest-environment-climate-change-policies-poll-pollution-jeremy-corbyn-labour-conservatives-a9206571.html>

## The environmental crisis

Cop26 has been a key event in assessing global progression regarding the environmental crisis, with the conference itself demonstrating an international desire to recognise and begin to combat the climate emergency. Cop26 has resulted in the international community recognising the level of threat that climate change presents, and alongside the recent publication of the 2021 IPCC report, has also lead to the target of limiting the rise in average global temperatures to 1.5°C<sup>2</sup>.

On the one hand, international events, such as Cop26 and the upcoming fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5), suggest progression in discussion, alongside formation of solutions, illustrated by actions such as the \$2bn pledge by world leaders to resort 100 million hectares of land in Africa<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, Cop26 has indicated that the international community remains unprepared to create significant change. This is seen most notably through the lack of policy being produced from these conferences, with these global events finding little agreement on pledges that require countries to implement serious reforms, and merely creating a façade that gives the impression the international community is making

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<sup>2</sup>IPCC (2021). *Climate Change 2021 Working Group I Contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. [online] Available at:

[https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC\\_AR6\\_WGI\\_SPM\\_final.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM_final.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> TREE AID. (n.d.). *Reflecting on COP26*. [online] Available at: [https://www.treeaid.org/blogs-updates/reflecting-on-](https://www.treeaid.org/blogs-updates/reflecting-on-cop26/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA_8OPBhDtARIsAKQu0gaYnV9QvJkMP8UNaP78FF7ik7B2uy1qcW2HFx4TMtsJ7w74t36Pn9QaAjQ4EALw_wcB)

[cop26/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA\\_8OPBhDtARIsAKQu0gaYnV9QvJkMP8UNaP78FF7ik7B2uy1qcW2HFx4TMtsJ7w74t36Pn9QaAjQ4EALw\\_wcB](https://www.treeaid.org/blogs-updates/reflecting-on-cop26/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiA_8OPBhDtARIsAKQu0gaYnV9QvJkMP8UNaP78FF7ik7B2uy1qcW2HFx4TMtsJ7w74t36Pn9QaAjQ4EALw_wcB)

headway in tackling the environmental crisis<sup>4</sup>. This issue deriving from the key problems of willingness to implement change, and also the global ability to do so, with these meaning that there is a lack of preparedness to address this emergency.

### Factor: Willingness

When it comes to international willingness to address environmental issues and tackle them, it appears that Europe and North-America lead the charge with setting up goals and putting policy in place for the protection of the environment. An example being the UK, through policies to restore hundreds of thousands of hectares of wildlife-habitat<sup>5</sup>, and being the first major economy to pass a net-zero emissions law, requiring net-zero carbon emissions by 2050<sup>6</sup>. However, this desire to take action does not seem to be shared globally, with nations such as China not meeting this widely accepted, scientifically crucial, deadline of 2050<sup>7</sup>, instead aiming for net-zero emissions by 2060, and India pledging to the later date of 2070<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, these two nations still remain heavily reliant on coal for their source of domestic power, ranking 1 and 2 respectively in global coal

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<sup>4</sup> The Guardian. (2021). *It could have been worse, but our leaders failed us at Cop26. That's the truth of it* | John Vidal. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/13/heres-the-truth-our-leaders-at-cop26-have-failed-us-the-rest-is-spin>

<sup>5</sup> DEFRA (2018). *At a glance: summary of targets in our 25 year environment plan*. [online] GOV.UK. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan/25-year-environment-plan-our-targets-at-a-glance>

<sup>6</sup> GOV.UK. (n.d.). *UK becomes first major economy to pass net zero emissions law*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-becomes-first-major-economy-to-pass-net-zero-emissions-law>.

<sup>7</sup> www.youtube.com. (n.d.). *Climate Action Tracker: The state of the climate crisis in 2021* | TED. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wJo5aKBwq0>

<sup>8</sup> COP26: India PM Narendra Modi pledges net zero by 2070. (2021). *BBC News*. [online] 1 Nov. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-59125143>

consumption; China alone accounting for just over half of yearly global coal usage, releasing astronomical levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, China and India are two of the largest omissions on the Global Methane Pledge, with 110 other countries committing to reducing methane emissions by 30% by 2030<sup>10</sup>. These statistics suggesting a disregard for the environmental battle taking place, and an unwillingness to co-operate on an international level to deal with the task at hand. However, there is more complexity in this issue than simply supposing certain countries are more environmentally-minded than others. In actuality, the issue stems from the difference in countries levels of development, with richer nations being able to focus more heavily on environmental aid and protection. For example, the UK, Switzerland and Nordic nations have more progressive policies and systems for protection of the environment, but also find themselves in and around the top 10 countries in the world in terms of their HDI<sup>11</sup>, with their infrastructure comparatively being far greater than nations such as India and China. Both of these nations share the common feelings of historical injustice. Their leaders feel that Western nations, having already gone through the process of industrialising, are unfairly trying to prohibit others from doing the same. In part this is a fair claim, the UK has been producing over 200 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>

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<sup>9</sup> Statista. (n.d.). *Leading countries in coal consumption globally 2019*. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/265510/countries-with-the-largest-coal-consumption/#:~:text=The%20world>

<sup>10</sup> Ecologi. (n.d.). *What was agreed at COP26?* [online] Available at: [https://ecologi.com/articles/blog/what-was-agreed-at-cop26?gclid=Cj0KCQiA\\_8OPBhDtARIsAKQu0gYy0Xn0KDeHWQowwQCbiCB6GP6jw46Jhhi7lpqO95JU-UDD8jwCtA4aAp7mEALw\\_wcB](https://ecologi.com/articles/blog/what-was-agreed-at-cop26?gclid=Cj0KCQiA_8OPBhDtARIsAKQu0gYy0Xn0KDeHWQowwQCbiCB6GP6jw46Jhhi7lpqO95JU-UDD8jwCtA4aAp7mEALw_wcB)

<sup>11</sup> World Population Review (2020). *Human Development Index (HDI) by Country 2020*. [online] [worldpopulationreview.com](https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hdi-by-country). Available at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/hdi-by-country>

emissions annually since 1865, with their first emissions starting almost 300 years ago<sup>12</sup> and although it could be argued that UK's cumulative emissions to date is less than half of China's, it must be recognised that the UK is now a predominantly serviced-based economy, whilst nations such as China depend heavily on manufacturing and exporting for economic growth. This illustrating how it is much harder for some states to detach themselves from using fossil fuels and producing emissions. Only recently have certain highly developed countries begun to step away from coal usage, yet they expect those who have not completed this process of industrialisation to do the same, in spite of their poorer living standards and lack of infrastructure.

Moreover, the efforts of nations who have the most progressive environmental policy still seems to be inadequate, suggesting a global reluctance to commit to large scale environmental aid and protection. The UK 2021-22 budget has allocated £5.8bn to the department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Total DEL excluding depreciation), out of the total Departmental Budget of £553.3bn<sup>13</sup>. These figures suggest that the environment still remains a secondary issue in the eyes of even the most environmentally progressive nations, and consolidates the

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<sup>12</sup> Ritchie, H. and Roser, M. (2020). CO<sub>2</sub> and Greenhouse Gas Emissions. *Our World in Data*. [online] Available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/co2/country/united-kingdom#what-are-the-country-s-annual-co2-emissions>

<sup>13</sup> BUDGET 2021 PROTECTING THE JOBS AND LIVELIHOODS OF THE BRITISH PEOPLE. (2021). [online] Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/966868/BUDGET\\_2021\\_-\\_web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/966868/BUDGET_2021_-_web.pdf).

notion that the international community is still unwilling and unprepared to effectively address the environmental crisis.

Factor: Ability to enact reform

The international community's lack of preparedness also stems from the inability to implement changes to address the environmental crisis, due to international attention being split between a multitude of global emergencies and the additional issue of political systematic barriers.

Since early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the greatest issue that the international community is facing, and has taken the forefront of the political agenda, with the UN chief noting that 'stopping coronavirus spread must be at the top of the agenda everywhere'. Alongside this, reformation of global finance, regulating the cyberspace, and enforcing peace and security, all demand vital time and resources from the international bodies to allow for prosperity and equality globally<sup>14</sup>. Although these emergencies importance is no greater than that of the environmental situation, and whilst it can be argued that they should be considered secondary matters to the environment, the point remains that the environment crisis is not the only concern that the world faces.

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<sup>14</sup> UN News. (2022). *UN chief calls for action to put out "5-alarm global fire."* [online] Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/01/1110292>

Nations are spending astronomical amounts of money to combat the pandemic, with the Covid-19 stimulus packages in G20 countries amounting to large percentage shares of their GDP. Italy, Germany and Japan all committing over 30% of their GDP to combatting the virus<sup>15</sup>. This key idea reinforcing the fact that nations and governing bodies are unable to solely focus on the environment, with international conflicts and crises, such as the situations in Afghanistan and Ukraine, taking short-term priority in the political world, over the long-term issue of the environmental emergency.

When looking into the long and short term, states that have Sovereign legislatures also have the additional hurdle of being unable to create long-lasting and fixed environmental change, due to governments' lifespans being so short, and future governments not being bound by their predecessors, meaning that previous legislation can be repealed and changed, with this affecting nations such as the UK, Belgium, France, Italy and Australia. The consequence of this being that environmental plans and legislation are not set in stone, and possibly subject to change at any moment. Although this system means that governments are able to rethink and re-engineer policy, it also does not allow for long-term stability when it comes to stances on the environment, due to the importance of the environment varying from one government to the next.

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<sup>15</sup> Statista. (n.d.). *COVID-19: value of G20 stimulus packages as share of GDP 2020*. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1107572/covid-19-value-g20-stimulus-packages-share-gdp/>

In conjunction, this creates a difficult situation for nations. They are spread-thin between the numerous problems that they face, and can often find the political system a hindrance in enacting policy for the benefit of the climate, meaning they are unprepared to carry out effective change.

## Conclusion

It is clear to see that the international community is not prepared to effectively address the current environmental crisis. Although progress is being made, it is both slow and insignificant. It can be reasonably concluded that this lack of preparedness is due to countries being unwilling and unable to create change. It can be said that due to countries being unwilling to address the environment, their inability to create change comes as a consequence. However, it is also plausible to argue that due to countries struggling to implement change because of the barriers they face, financially, and logistically, they become less incentivised to resolve the environmental crisis at hand, however the former appears to be a favourable explanation. Nevertheless, when discussing the issue of the environment, we must recognise that ‘we need to accomplish something gigantic we have never done before, much faster than we have ever done anything similar’<sup>16</sup> .

Word Count: 1566

*Body text only (excluding titles, footnote)*

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<sup>16</sup> Gates, B. (2021). How to Avoid a Climate Disaster : the Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need. Random House Inc.