

Reasons to Be Hopeful About Climate Action After COP26

By Wayne Visser

On the face of it, COP26 – the climate meeting in Glasgow – has failed, with the world still heading for 2.4°C warming this century. This would be catastrophic for humans and nature. So why am I hopeful? The short answer is that the decarbonisation of our global society, and the economic system that underpins it, has become inevitable and unstoppable. What's more, COP26, despite the painful process of disappointing compromises of UN negotiations, has indisputably accelerated the pace.

My conclusion is based on an understanding of the science of complex, living systems and how they change. This analysis, which is further elaborated in my book, *Thriving*, applies three tests to determine whether we are moving rapidly in the direction of regeneration rather than decline. The tests ask: are we increasing or decreasing complex coherence, creative convergence, and cyclical continuity? If they are all increasing, we stand a good chance that the forces of breakthrough will outpace the forces of breakdown.

Test 1: Complex coherence

The first test recognises that all living systems – from forests to families, oceans to organisations, cities to economies – are made up of complex networks of relationships, joined together by a coherent function or purpose. The more connections there are and the more aligned their common purpose, the more the system thrives. So, did COP26 help or hinder the emergence of complex coherence?

The meeting reached a consensus agreement among nearly 200 countries to take bolder action to tackle climate change. Strategic alliances of hundreds of countries, companies and NGOs emerged around phasing out fossil fuels, cutting methane, reversing deforestation and scaling clean energy. Key points of coherence emerged around keeping the 1.5°C target alive, making the 2020s the decade of bold action, funding a just transition. The race to zero has turned from an elite sport to a global movement.

Test 2: Creative convergence

The second test recognises that change in living systems happens when there is a convergence of factors that reinforce one another. The scientists call these positive feedback loops. The industrial revolution, for example, happened because of a convergence of changes in technologies, transport, and energy, resulting in a boom of innovation that improved our quality of life dramatically. So, did COP26 strengthen or weaken creative convergence?

We have seen a convergence of bolder government policy positions, increased levels of finance, more active commitments by business and rising pressure from civil society. We have also seen convergence through a swath of unprecedented agreements among businesses, banks, philanthropists, and NGOs, to scale up innovation (like the Glasgow Breakthrough Agenda) and to support the transition with finance (like the \$130tn of the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero). This has set off a chain of self-reinforcing effects – a virtuous spiral.

Test 3: Cyclical continuity

The third test recognises that the balance and continuity of life is ensured through cycles and flows, where growth is moderated through counteracting forces, which scientists call balancing feedback loops. For a living system to survive and thrive, it must constantly moderate, constrain, repair and renew itself. So, did COP26 enhance or erode cyclical continuity?

The jury is still out on this one. We have upset the balance of the Earth, already exceeding four of the nine planetary boundaries (climate change, biosphere integrity, land system change, and biochemical flows), pushing us into the danger zone of systems collapse. Keeping 1.5 alive at COP26, together with the agreements on deforestation, cutting fossil fuels and increasing renewable energy, can help to put us back on a path of healing and regeneration. We are giving ourselves and the billions of organisms we share the planet with a fighting chance to survive.

A breakthrough movement of hope

COP26 convincingly passes two of the three tests for ensuring thriving systems, with the third test a borderline pass/fail. This perspective requires that we do not judge Glasgow as a make-or-break moment in time, but rather as a crucial step in a remarkable journey of global transformation. To use a film metaphor, we should not get stuck focusing on an isolated movie-still; we need to consider the larger movie plot that is unfolding.

My hope is not blind optimism or wishful thinking. Hope is planted in the fertile soil of the possibility for change, and nurtured by urgent, bold action. We are in a fight for our lives. And yet we know from studying the science of systems that change can happen remarkably quickly when there is an alignment of the forces of complexity, coherence, creativity, convergence, circularity, and continuity.

This should be the key takeaway message from Glasgow: We have not yet solved the climate crisis. We have not yet aligned with the Paris Agreement target of 1.5°C. We are not yet acting according to the science. But we have made real progress. The International Energy Agency has calculated that, if we factor in all the agreements announced at COP26, and if they are met in full and on time, they would be enough to hold the rise in global temperatures to 1.8 °C.

I draw hope from this, but even more from the fact that COP26 has successfully created a virtuous cycle of reinforcing, enabling conditions for systems change to accelerate. Now we need to go out and make it happen.

Highlights from COP26

The overall COP agreement reinforces the target of keeping global warming to under 1.5°C, and for the first time includes specific references to fossil fuels (to ‘phase down unabated coal and to ‘phased out inefficient fossil fuel subsidies’). It also addresses the need for a just transition with finance for adaptation, loss, and damage for developing countries. And it calls for more ambitious action plans to be submitted by countries by the end of 2022. In addition, the following subsidiary alliances, agreements and commitments were announced:

- More than 100 countries have agreed to reverse deforestation by 2030, backed by \$19.2bn.
- More than 90 countries have agreed to reduce methane emissions by at least 30% from current levels by 2030.
- More than 40 countries have agreed to end their investment in new coal power generation domestically and internationally.
- More than 10 countries have agreed to phase out oil and gas production.
- India has committed to reach net zero by 2070, including reaching 50% renewable energy by 2030.
- China and the US have agreed to work together to increase the adoption of renewable energy and electric vehicles and to cut methane in the 2020s
- The Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet (GEAPP) is aiming to unlock \$100bn to ensure access to clean affordable energy everywhere by everyone.
- The Glasgow Breakthrough Agenda is bringing innovation to the hard-to-decarbonise sectors of power, road transport, steel, hydrogen and agriculture.
- The Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero (GFANZ) represents 450 firms across 45 countries and over \$130tn of private capital that is now committed to transforming the economy for net zero.

This article draws on themes from the book *Thriving: The Breakthrough Movement to Regenerate Nature, Society and the Economy* (Fast Company Press, February 2022), available for pre-ordering.

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