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## Why the empowerment agenda at COP26 matters for the success of the Paris Agreement

*The post-Covid recovery planning provided an unprecedented opportunity for scaling up climate action in a win-win for people and planet. Large numbers of people all over the world want to see their governments taking credible action on climate change, and as a result 70% of the world's economy is now under long-term decarbonisation targets, according to [COP26 UK President Hon. Alok Sharma](#), counting the pledges that countries made in the run up to and at the Climate Ambition Summit of December 2020. However, countries [must still dramatically increase the ambition](#) of their emission reductions—particularly in the near term. What explains this? Do political leaders feel they haven't got the requisite political space to do more on climate for now? If so, are they working then to build more political space for themselves? They will need it even more in the near future, to advance the increasingly transformational measures which will have an impact on people's lifestyles but that will be required to stay within the "well below 2°C" target of the Paris Agreement. This is why UNFCCC Parties ought to adopt a more ambitious work programme for climate empowerment at Glasgow next November and place it at the heart of their national climate planning, and count on parliaments as delivery partners, as the institutions representing the people and making decisions on climate change. This will make life easier for themselves going forward – it will allow them to foster the groundswell of energy across societies in favour of climate action and funnel it into the high-ambition, effective and inclusive climate policy and implementation required by the Paris Agreement. Last but not least, in doing so they will also be providing a much-needed shot in the arm to democracy.*

### Missing the Covid-19 Stimulus Opportunity

As the Coronavirus crisis began to dominate headlines in March 2020, climate leaders raised the alarm about the risk of governments directing economic stimulus to high carbon sectors. As governments mobilised unprecedented sums of public money to keep economies afloat, environmental advocates made the case for using the opportunity to "build back greener".

They had reasons to worry that the short term reduction in carbon emissions would not last, recalling that after the global financial crisis in 2008, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [surged](#) back to their previous levels and beyond on a wave of carbon-intensive stimulus spending. Also of concern was that COVID-19 would distract countries just as they were expected to table fresh, additional, more ambitious commitments to climate action (updated Nationally Determined Contributions, NDCs) in the run up to COP26. These worries have proven prescient: according to analysts, the first wave of COVID-19 stimulus packages [were ominously climate-blind](#), a few exceptions proving the norm: in Western Europe, South Korea and Canada at least a portion of spending is likely to be nature-friendly, coupled with green energy and transport infrastructure investment. Despite considerable evidence suggesting that

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environmentally restorative fiscal policies may be among the most effective tools for economic recovery, very little green spending of this kind was announced in 2020.

The [‘NextGenerationEU’](#) package is the greenest stimulus package. Of the €750 billion (US\$830bn) package, 37% will be directed towards green initiatives, including targeted measures to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, enhance energy efficiency and invest in preserving and restoring natural capital. Furthermore, all recovery loans and grants to EU member states will have attached ‘do no harm’ environmental safeguards. In addition, €356.4 billion of the [7-year EU budget](#) adopted in December 2020 are allocated to natural resources and environment – the second largest heading. The latest analysis from the [UN Environment Programme and Oxford University](#) published on 11 March records USD14.6tn in announced spending across the world’s largest fifty countries in 2020, of which 13% was directed to long-term ‘recovery-type’ measures and of that, 18% to green recovery initiatives. Considering total spending, only 2.5% was announced for green initiatives. The report confirms that green investment has largely been driven by a small group of high-income nations, such as Denmark, Germany, France, and South Korea. Among the major emerging economies only Poland and Turkey had encouragingly green, albeit smaller, spending.

Between May and September, authoritative voices from [Oxford](#) to the [OECD](#) in Paris were articulating how green recovery investment would also lead to better economic and social outcomes. ‘*The most consequential question looming over us right now is not whether we can address the Covid-19 crisis and climate change at the same time, but rather whether we can afford not to do so*’, wrote in the Financial Times [Christiana Figueres](#), the former Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and champion of the Paris Agreement. After the first rush for macro stabilisation, is the message finally reaching national treasuries and planning offices? Only so much, if the climate ambition reflected in the updated NDCs that countries have submitted so far is a good proxy. Despite the ever-stronger tailwinds, from the falling costs of clean energy to the steady trickle of countries committing to carbon neutrality by 2050, to the extent that, after [China’s recent commitment](#) to carbon neutrality by 2060, 70 per cent of the world economy has a decarbonisation horizon, strong undercurrents are still undermining the climate ambition of political leaders in the short term.

This has been further evidenced in the recent G7 Leaders’ Summit in Cornwall: the [communiqué](#) included commitments to set net-zero targets for the power sector for the 2030 decade, and to “*submitting long-term strategies that set out concrete pathways to net-zero greenhouse emissions by 2050 as soon as possible, making utmost efforts to do so by COP26*” – that is, they planned to make a plan, while not committing to a date to phase out coal domestically, and falling short of the expectation greening national budgets and providing financial support to the Global South.

What is holding back political leaders who in principle accept the need for climate action? Decision-makers operate under the pressure of political imperatives, which in democratic countries are bound to be deeply shaped by short-term factors, which often constrain their political space and push them away

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from climate action. Even autocrats feel pressure to keep their populations happy and are generally cautious about undertaking reforms that could disrupt people's lives in the short term. Well-targeted climate action can be an economic and societal win-win, and the cost of inaction is well documented. A lack of awareness about these powerful facts constitutes a form of conceptual climate disempowerment for decision-makers and society at large.

## For the people, with the people

Fortunately, the inclusion of [Article 6](#) in the Convention in 1992 recognised the importance of engaging the public in climate decision making – although it does not impose any binding obligations on Parties. Article 6 holds the key to citizens and civil society being a big part of the solution: under Article 6 Parties shall *'(...) Promote and facilitate at the national and, as appropriate, subregional and regional levels, and in accordance with national laws and regulations, and within their respective capacities: (...) (ii) public access to information on climate change and its effects; (iii) public participation in addressing climate change and its effects and developing adequate responses; (...)'* Through this Article, environmental democracy principles were baked into the UNFCCC from the start, and have been reflected in climate instruments ever since, including the Paris Agreement, and in regional conventions in Europe and Latin America.

## You empower me, I empower you back

Inevitably, work under the Convention started off heavily focused on government action, with negotiations led by specialist bureaucrats on how to share climate efforts fairly among nations. In the aftermath of the failure to reach a global agreement on climate action in Copenhagen in 2009, the rise of the “empowerment agenda”, thus far of low profile under Article 6, blew fresh air into the UNFCCC process. The Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment (ACE) adopted in Doha in 2012 was a watershed moment for the spirit of Article 6 in acknowledging explicitly the critical role of actors beyond central authorities, including the citizenry (and their representatives), public institutions, sub-national political leaders, political parties, civil society, businesses, unions, schools, universities, and the media, amongst many others, including in the arts, religious groups, and (critically) indigenous communities. ACE encompasses six components: education, training, public awareness, access to information, public participation, and international cooperation. In short, under the UNFCCC, ACE reinforces the role of people to engage in climate action and define the national political economies under which negotiators negotiate and politicians choose to act (or often, don't).

A recommitment to the role all of society can play in climate action is perfectly suited for this moment: climate action remains insufficiently ambitious to close the emissions gap and we are now on course to over 3°C, as [UNEP's last annual gap report](#) shows. [Yet societal concern and willingness to participate in solving the climate crisis](#) have exploded, and ACE provides valuable instruments to harness this energy

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and help drive urgent action. Over the last several years, this is illustrated best by the ever-increasing list of non-state actor climate actions included in the [Global Climate Action Portal](#) and the work of the [Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action](#). The climate empowerment agenda triggers a virtuous cycle, where those who become empowered by governments to engage in climate change governance end up empowering the governments back. The “[Ambition Loop](#)” between business and government is an example this virtuous cycle, and it is exactly this virtuous cycle that will drive whole-of-society action on climate.

## Empowerment – the engine of the Paris Agreement

Under the Paris Agreement, the ambition of climate goals is politically encouraged rather than legally bound, unlike under its predecessor, the Kyoto Protocol. Only the processes governing the reporting and review of these goals are mandated under international law. But if the sustained political will of national leaders for ever greater climate action is the lifeblood of the Paris Agreement, it follows that the mechanisms for ever expanding the requisite “political space” available to political leaders must be its heart.

The ability of the so-called ‘ratchet mechanism’ of the Paris Agreement, under which countries agree to commit to ever-accelerating climate action every five years, to deliver enhanced climate ambition is predicated on the optimistic assumption that governments will be *politically capable* to table said commitments and deliver at home over the next decades. It presumes that political leaders will find the necessary political space back home to adopt an ambitious target for clean energy, to redirect harmful subsidies or to make substantial investments in nature-based adaptation. It also assumes there is enough interest, knowledge, and access to policymaking among those that are meant to hold government accountable to make a difference to actual implementation.

The Agreement points, cautiously, to the remedy for the predicament of “political space scarcity” of political leaders, even if for the untrained eye the arch supporting the political logic of the entire Agreement may be as invisible as if it had been ciphered in lemon juice and had to be read against the light. Article 12 of the Agreement states that “*Parties shall cooperate in taking measures, as appropriate, to enhance climate change education, training, public awareness, public participation and public access to information, recognizing the importance of these steps with respect to enhancing actions under this Agreement*”. In other words, “*Parties may want to diligently apply themselves to building political space for ever accelerating climate action, so that it is there when they need it*”.

The ACE toolbox is vast: raise public awareness about climate change; ensure access to climate change information; embed it in national curricula; encourage and enhance public participation in climate decisions to ensure wide societal ownership of ambitious climate policies; apply innovative approaches, such as deliberative democracy. UNESCO has recently published a [guide to support](#)

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[countries in achieving Paris Agreement's goals through ACE](#), it is to be hoped that it will inform NDC updates ahead of COP26 in Glasgow.

The implementation of the six components of ACE is, in fact, an existential condition for the delivery of the Paris Agreement, particularly in a democracy, for two reasons. First, because it will help create the political space that governments are going to need to scale up their climate ambition in an accelerated fashion as expected under the ratchet mechanism. Aren't people supposed to participate in the important decisions? And second, because, in fact, isn't the implementation of those actions what ought to be expected from a democracy?

## Climate empowerment in times of pandemic & Glasgow COP26

The [NDCs submitted already ahead of Glasgow](#) do not yet put us on track to meet the Paris Agreement's goals, even if 75% of emissions are still to be captured in the outstanding NDCs. Those countries still to submit their NDCs must enhance their efforts; otherwise, do we conclude that political leaders in a majority of countries feel that they do not have the necessary political space to embrace climate programming in a transformative way in their Covid-19 recovery investment, regardless of the dire consequences for the climate emergency, and regardless of the growing evidence demonstrating that it would make sense economically and socially?

And, indeed, it would appear that many political leaders feel that they have run out of political space to move faster, particularly after the myriad challenges dealing with the COVID crisis. Yet if they do not find untapped reservoirs of political space for new commitments in now, and again in 2025, the 2°C target of Paris Agreement will, in turn, run out of road. It is time they remember the potential of the empowerment agenda.

ACE work is voluntary under the Paris Agreement, but that is beside the point: once the penny drops, governments serious about climate action should be keen to embrace it and place it at the core of their (political) climate strategy. ACE work strands can underpin the delivery of their sectoral climate targets. A strategic approach to ACE would be to include commitments inside updated NDCs, thus reassuring that the climate ambition stated will be delivered, while also demonstrating a commitment to increasing public participation in their implementation.

Initial evidence from [UNFCCC's review of the implementation of the Doha Work Programme for ACE](#) – which WFD has aided by facilitating the participation of national legislators in [regional ACE dialogues](#) – indicates that Doha lacked sufficient ambition and commitment from the Parties, and that the UNFCCC climate empowerment agenda is practically unknown among national decision-makers as well as subnational and local officials.

This is why the decision on a new multi-annual Work Programme on ACE, which is meant to be adopted in Glasgow, is so important. The 'Glasgow Work Plan' needs to address the key challenges that have

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prevented ACE from being fully implemented in many countries, so that it is placed strategically at the heart of national action plans on climate. It must also be adequately integrated across the Convention and as a delivery mechanism of the Paris Agreement as well as with other international frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ACE and the wider empowerment agenda are critical for a politically feasible and just transition, as it will require affected groups and individuals to understand future scenarios, participate fully and effectively in decisions that impact their communities and livelihoods, and have access to necessary training to ensure social and economic security.

Parliaments and other accountability actors have a role to play in ensuring it is ambitious, in monitoring and holding the government to account for its implementation, as well as in contributing to its implementation through enhanced citizen participation.

## The future of the empowerment agenda

Jesse Worker and Nathan Cogswell from the Environmental Democracy Practice and the International Climate Action Initiative of the World Resources Institute (WRI) have been informing our thinking on the future of the empowerment agenda at the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and ParlAmericas. This first input was at the basis of a joint contribution, alongside [GLOBE International](#), on [The Role of Parliaments as Drivers of Action for Climate Empowerment](#), submitted to the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SBI) on the future of ACE. In the aftermath of COP26, WFD will convene a Conference on Environmental Democracy which will, inter alia, take stock of the Glasgow Work Programme on ACE and explore ways in which the international democracy assistance and climate communities need to join forces to exploit the potential of the new framework to the fullest. Watch this space.

The signatories to the statement are:

- **Senator Rosa Galvez**, President of the ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network on Climate Change, **Canada**
- **Hon. Munaza Hassan**, Chairwoman of the Climate Change Committee of the National Assembly of **Pakistan**
- **Hon. Fadli Zon**; Chairman of the Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation Committee of the House of Representatives of **Indonesia**
- **Hon. Japhet Miriti Kareke Mbiuki**, Chairman of the Environment & Natural Resources Committee of the National Assembly of **Kenya**
- **Maia Bitadze MP**, Chair of the Environmental Protection And Natural Resources Committee, Parliament of **Georgia**
- **Alisha Todd**, ParlAmericas, Director General
- **Rafael Jimenez Aybar**, WFD, Environmental Democracy Adviser

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WFD is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make countries' political systems fairer and more inclusive, accountable, and transparent. WFD works together with like-minded organisations, like ParlAmericas, to advance shared objectives.

The ParlAmericas Parliamentary Network on Climate Change (PNCC) promotes parliamentary diplomacy on climate action within parliaments, aligned with the Paris Agreement and other existing international frameworks that work towards combating climate change and achieving sustainable development. The PNCC fosters knowledge exchanges between parliamentarians, expert practitioners, civil society, government officials and other stakeholders on effective practices for climate change mitigation and adaptation through workshops, dialogues, and the creation of specialized resources. It will continue to create spaces for parliamentarians to participate in international dialogues to contribute to the development of strategies to promote Action for Climate Empowerment and support the implementation of good parliamentary practices to strengthen access to information, raise awareness and foster citizen participation on climate issues.

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