

# Behind the Scenes at the COP26 Glasgow United Nations Climate Conference

**Saraly Gonzalez, Dennis Plane, Matthew Powell, and Kali Pupo**

*December 6, 2021*

Saraly Gonzalez '21 is an Environmental Science POE; Dennis Plane is Professor of Politics; Matthew Powell is Professor of Geology; and Kali Pupo '22, is an Environmental Studies POE, all at Juniata College.

In 1992, the United Nations convened a meeting of its members to talk about what they were going to do to address the climate crisis. It established the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, (UNFCCC), which scheduled regular meetings of all the nations that were party to this environmental treaty. That annual meeting is called the Conference of Parties, or “COP,” and a group of students and faculty from Juniata College attended the 26<sup>th</sup> meeting, held in Glasgow, Scotland, in November 2021.

**Matthew Powell:** There were 40,000 people who went to COP26. About 22,000 of them were representatives of the parties. They were diplomats and heads of state who were there to further negotiate the treaties. Approximately another 4,000 were members of the press. And everybody else, something like 14,000 of us, were called “observers” or “observer organizations,” which was how we were able to go. The observer organizations are like NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) and IGOs (intergovernmental organizations) that were there to provide voice for the world—to represent the people’s voice in these negotiations.

Do COPs work? Data from [CarbonBrief](#) suggests that if the Conferences of the Parties weren’t happening, the world would be a lot warmer than it is now.<sup>1</sup> Is that lessening of warming enough? Other people would argue that it is not. Yet prior to COP26, computer modeling put us at 2.6 degrees Celsius of warming above the pre-industrial baseline. With all the commitments that were made prior to COP26—the nations submit in advance what they’re going to do to address climate change—the modeling predicted a 2.4 degree increase. And then the commitments that emerged during the actual conference would get us down to 2.3. The 2015 Paris Agreement says that we need to get below 2, and ideally to 1.5 degrees. Nations also made a number of other promises that were not within the treaty itself. If they follow through on them, then we can potentially limit warming to 1.8 degrees Celsius. If nations follow through on their commitments, then we could actually achieve our goals. So, yes—COPs do work.



Figure 1: (left to right) Kali Pupo, Saraly Gonzalez, Dennis Plane, Matthew Powell, and two other Juniata students in Scotland. Source: Dennis Plane

**Kali Pupo:** I feel like I witnessed two versions of COP: one with the older, more diplomatic generation, and the other with a younger, more frustrated generation. What was really interesting were the demonstrations inside the venue, and these were all done by young people. You could tell security was very concerned, but it was just a bunch of young people chanting about human rights and how fossil fuels needed to go. I saw so much more frustration and impatience towards the political process from the younger generation. One of my main takeaways is that young people felt that it is time for actions and not words. I think it is really important that COPs do work. When we look at the commitments, I think you're going to see young people say that it's time to turn those into reality. And I don't think that has happened on nearly a large enough scale so far, nor fast enough. For example, in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement they were going to make this rule book for a carbon emissions trading system. But they only just finished making those rules this year, six years later. It has not been implemented or anything. So, if it takes six years to just make the rules, we're going far too slowly, and we already know that. And I think that's what I saw from young people. Not that young people have cornered the market on political disillusionment, but I think I saw it more from the younger people.



Figure 2: Negotiations in a small side room. Source: Kali Pupo

**Powell:** The leaders show up every year at COP and they move us a few inches forward, just a little bit at a time. And the observers, like us, sit right behind them. A bunch of chairs are just lined up against the wall. Sometimes it's weird because you can hear the negotiators talking among themselves before they flick on the mic to make a statement. They are also on camera here. The person who is on this screen is in the room, but while they're talking they appear on the screen. And when they're done, they walk out into the same halls where we observers walk. So there are few boundaries, even though there is incredible security to get into the venue. There are SWAT teams outside and multiple checkpoints.

**Pupo:** Boris Johnson was swamped by security, but I caught Pete Buttigieg walking unfettered. It was the most beautiful thirty seconds of my entire life. He had finished his speech and then I waited outside the door. I started to walk away but then I thought, "Let's see if he comes out. Why not?" And when I turned back around, he was right there. I started fangirling and asked for his picture. He is a very nice guy. He talked to me a little bit and then went on his way. He didn't have nearly as much security as Boris Johnson, but I think he should have.



Figure 3: Kali Pupo and U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. Source: Kali Pupo

**Powell:** Right outside the conference rooms there were workspaces for anybody who wanted to use them. In the first two days when the heads of state were there (Biden for the United States, prime ministers, etc.) there was high security. We couldn't get in there. But otherwise, everybody was just mingling in the hallways, using the workspaces, and so forth.

**Saraly Gonzalez:** One of my major takeaways was seeing the lack of proper spaces for indigenous people to share their views. This reflects larger inequities such as a lack of representation because it is really hard to travel to Scotland. Also, some COP events were offered online and at one event there was a young Mexican activist who kept getting skipped over because her wi-fi or Zoom didn't work. Her time was cut short because of that and so that's her voice not being heard. COP26 had a vaccination requirement, but it gave exceptions for countries that had less access to vaccines. But honestly, who would be comfortable attending this international gathering if you're unvaccinated?

Representation is especially important because some of these negotiations directly affected indigenous populations. For example, I saw a lot of discussion about Article 6, which focuses on forest

and land use. Some of the issues involve different illegal land seizures in Honduras, the killings of indigenous land protectors in 2020, and the killing of 331 indigenous and non-indigenous people during other land grabs. Local communities are calling for radical change and it's just not happening.

**Dennis Plane:** My first general observation was the ease of being able to witness international diplomacy. In politics, of course we read a lot about diplomacy. We teach a lot about diplomacy. But to see this truly international group actually engaged in real diplomacy is just a very rare opportunity. If you think about it, there's really no other event where you have representatives from almost every country in the world all together in the same place. I mean, maybe the Olympics, but even then lots of countries don't participate.

Listening to the diplomatic language of these folks and observing the way they talk with each other was just fascinating. There would be this very polite, diplomatic language that was covering up really brutal arguments underneath. We saw lots of debates for which, if you're not paying attention, the underlying issues are really hard to understand. It's language like debating whether you are going to "welcome" a committee report rather than "take note" of it—a difference that might yield a twenty-minute debate over the stronger language or the watered-down language. "Taking note" is like saying, "Oh, yeah, a report exists." But "welcoming" it is like saying, "Oh, we agree with the report's conclusions."

One of the biggest sticking points was about financing. Who is going to pay to address climate change and to fix the damage to the planet that the developed countries have caused through decades of burning fossil fuels? While we may all agree on what needs to be done, we do not agree on who is going to pay for it.





Figure 4: An informal “huddle” of negotiators working on an issue. Source: Dennis Plane.

I think this is my favorite picture from COP26. Here you have various parties (i.e., countries) engaged in informal huddles. The formal diplomatic language sometimes needs to be parsed with microphones off in these informal but highly effective huddles. Huddles might occur among like-minded countries to get on the same page, or between countries with different agendas trying to bridge gaps. “What if we changed the language to this? What if we changed the language to that? Would we have your support?” A lot of this work was done in these informal huddles and then they’d come back and say, “Well, this is the language we propose.” And then maybe there would be another huddle or maybe it would simply be approved.

I was surprised to learn that they don’t really have votes. Everything is done by consensus, which is another way of saying any country can object. It’s not quite unanimous, meaning that you don’t have to get everyone to agree, but you do have to make sure that no party objects. To achieve consensus, everything becomes watered down, which I think is part of Kali’s frustration. The international community is not making sufficient progress addressing climate change because we need to get 200 nations to reach a consensus on how to do it.

Subtle language can make the difference between small island nations being willing to agree or not. I did not feel these sorts of discussions over language were a waste of time or of energy because the devil is in the details and we have to get the details right. Or the countries will not agree to it.

**Powell:** The conference has plenary sessions, and then there are what are called informals. Informals are the meetings where the negotiating is happening in those small rooms where we sat along the walls. There are also “informal” informals where the negotiators say, “We need to keep working on this thing, can you get us a room?” And then the session chair will get them a room and they’ll go over there and talk. We generally weren’t invited to those. And then there are the huddles that Dennis mentioned, where they meet with each other out the hallways or wherever. As observers we weren’t allowed to bother them.

**Plane:** There was an exhibition hall where countries or NGOs set up a booth (called a “pavilion”) to brag about their accomplishments or make a case for their preferred course of action. This is the South African pavilion. It partly advertised for South Africa and partly bragged about how South Africa is addressing climate change. The various pavilions also hosted small informal speeches or presentations where you could join about twenty other people to hear from the minister of economic development or whomever.

**Pupo:** Another one of my main observations from COP was the tension between developed and developing countries. Essentially, developed countries caused the problem, right? We got rich off of burning fossil fuels and developing countries want to be able to get rich as well, but now we’re saying to them, “If you develop more, you’re going to push us over the edge.” This is a very unfair situation. I also just didn’t see developed countries take enough responsibility for being the main contributors. For example, developed countries were supposed to set up this \$100 billion adaptation and mitigation fund to help developing countries shift to a greener economy and to help them deal with climate change. But developed countries didn’t meet this goal by 2020, so then they say, “Let’s push it to 2025.” Meanwhile, developing countries don’t have these funds that are essential for dealing with climate change. They also feel like they shouldn’t have the majority of the financial burden for a problem that they didn’t cause, a problem that disproportionately hurts poorer, developing countries. It was very interesting to see the financial negotiations and the little tensions between countries like us, Switzerland, and Australia on the one side, and on the other side the small island nations that are going to be especially badly hurt by rising sea levels.

**Gonzalez:** I was in a conversation about the Global South’s urgent need for capacity building. They could get all of this money but they don’t have the capacity to do the projects. They’re dealing with so many other issues that intersect with climate change, like insecurity and poverty, that affect capacity building. And climate change is a gendered issue; women in the Global South are impacted probably the most. Some capacity that could be built might be technology, personal training, universal education, and women empowerment, and that could really help create effective climate change action.

**Plane:** The governments of the countries have a responsibility for what's happening within their borders. That's part of sovereignty. But I think one of the major themes at COP is that the other countries of the world also have a responsibility, a special responsibility, to help the developing countries meet their basic needs so that they can turn to the luxury of addressing climate change.

**Powell:** I agree that we're not moving forward fast enough, but I was actually also impressed that we were even talking about those things at COP26. If you look back ten years ago, COPs were talking about mitigation, which is how to stop emitting carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Now there's serious consideration of adaptation, the kind of funding needed in order to deal with the warming that we have already caused. And then even further than that, as Kali says, they discussed losses and damages, which recognizes that damage has already occurred and that we need remuneration for that. The fact that it's part of the conversation at all, I think, is a real advance.

**Pupo:** The fact that we need it now means that we didn't mitigate enough.

**Powell:** Good point.

**Pupo:** To change gears for a bit, I went into these big headline events—the main events of the day—and I thought I was going to learn all of this fantastic information about public policies that national leaders had put in place, where the funding was going, and what exactly was going to happen. But all I got was a lot of big talk, so that was really frustrating. That's where all the press was so the leaders have to sound good, but it became very frustrating not to hear specific examples of what was being done. Eventually I gave up on these headline events and started going to smaller meetings where people discussed their research, or a local government talked about exactly what public policies it had established. While the large meetings were full of fanfare, I found the smaller side events with local or state governments or researchers more enlightening and full of specific solutions. That's what's depicted in the picture below.





Figure 7: Health in Harmony’s Action Hub event, “Voices of Rainforest Communities Practicing Planetary Health,” November 8, 2023. Source: Kali Pupo.

One of my notes says, “Around the world, commendable action by local governments while national governments fail to take any meaningful action. Example: California.” It’s very easy to get discouraged when national governments are not doing nearly as much as they should. But it’s important to recognize that subnational actors like city governments and state governments are doing a lot. I was in a couple research meetings where they were talking about digitalization and increasing public transportation and electric vehicle use in cities. All of that was pretty great to see because I think that it doesn’t get covered by the media. Local actors are doing a lot to combat climate change and all of that can add up. California is light years ahead of any kind of climate policy our national government has made.

**Powell:** Another take-home lesson for me was that this is the first time in twenty-six COPs—so, since 1992—that the words “fossil fuels” made it into what they call the cover decision, which is the final document that gets produced that all of the nations consent to. By the time it came through the wringer it was “unabated coal,” which means you could keep burning coal as long as you were also capturing the carbon that came out. And then nations would “take note” (or some terms like that) of oil and gas, which is not strong but the words were in there. Burning fossil fuels is the main cause of climate change; it’s essentially the only cause of climate change. The world must transition from a fossil-fuel-based economy to a clean-energy-based economy. Until that transition happens, none of this stuff is going to change.

But no one has been able to say that. The term “fossil fuels” had been introduced in the past, and then immediately an oil-producing nation or oil-and-gas-producing nation would object. You have to have one hundred percent consensus, so as soon as somebody objects then the term has to come out or there will be no agreement. The watering down came from two countries, India and China, who objected to the original, more forceful, language. It led to a lot of exasperation, which I was happy to see. But the fact that the term was in the cover decision at all, I consider to be the most important advance of COP26, maybe of any COP.

I was in a negotiating room and the representatives from Saudi Arabia said something to the effect of, “We know that carbon dioxide emitted by burning fossil fuels is the cause of the problem, but we have an economy that’s based on it, so what do you expect us to do?” And I thought, “Okay, we’ve finally gotten to the point of honesty.” And I think they have a valid point. You don’t want to collapse society on your way to fixing society. But at least we were able to talk about it. So for that reason, I came away more optimistic than I when I went in.

**Plane:** To clarify a bit, the original language in the cover decision was about ending subsidies for fossil fuels. This acknowledges that countries all around the world, including developed countries, subsidize the use of fossil fuels. In the United States, for example, we sell oil and gas leases at below-market value, which is a type of subsidy. This language in the cover decision points out the irony that fossil fuels are causing the damage, but countries are subsidizing their use. If you can’t agree to stop subsidizing what is causing damage, then it’s hard to make any progress, right? So including this language to end fossil fuel subsidies was the big breakthrough. But this language was watered down so much that it wasn’t much of a breakthrough after all. In the end, the watered-down language called for ending “inefficient” subsidies and the “unabated” use of coal.

My second takeaway is that I felt there was a true, honest desire amongst the countries of the world to address this problem. They didn’t agree on how to do it, but they all agreed that yes, this is a problem; that yes, we have been putting off addressing it for far too long; that yes, we’re not doing enough; but we recognize all of that and we want to move forward. These diverse countries of the world—from small island nations, to big polluters like the U.S. and China, to oil-producing countries like Saudi Arabia—all recognized the urgency of the situation and had some desire to address it. Yes, skeptics might say that just recognizing there’s a problem isn’t enough. If you’re not willing to take action, that isn’t enough. But I was heartened to see a consensus agree that something needs to be done. And almost every country in the world was there; I think North Korea wasn’t, and remember that under Trump the U.S. wasn’t either. So there was also this giant sigh of relief that one of the major contributors to the problem showed up.

**Pupo:** My point is not that these meetings don't work. I think that they do work and they're fantastic shows of international leadership and diplomacy. But I believe that if we look back maybe ten years, you could recycle some of the speeches. It's clear that the same themes have been rehashed and that progress is lagging, and we know this. I think that just means from the bottom up, a lot of times we have to do more to be advocates for change and, for example, think about who we vote for. And the political will for this issue still has to keep going because we need to demand more from COPs.

**Audience:** Do you see any irony in a global climate change conference that 40,000 people got on airplanes to get there? In an era of Zoom, there is power in gathering together. But we also have opportunities and resources. So how do we find that balance in order to effect the change?

**Pupo:** While our individual choices do matter, me choosing not to take the flight won't change anything. Innovations that would make flights more efficient in terms of their emissions are the important things to focus on. There's all this talk of things like carbon-free fuels for flights, and I think that's what it's really going to take because I don't think you can shut down that kind of travel in today's world. I think it's going to take massive innovation in terms of what kinds of fuels we use.

**Powell:** You have to live in the world, the broken world, while you're fixing it. Corporations especially are invested in you believing that the solution is you. That the problem is that it's your fault that you haven't recycled this and that you didn't buy that green product. But the solutions are that the corporations need to make commitments. And we collectively, the governments of the world, need to decide to stop subsidizing fossil fuels and do a real transition over into clean energy. The problems they're talking about, sitting in these negotiating rooms, are about how you finance these things at \$100 billion a year. It's not about this flight or that flight. I would say the number one thing that you can do to change the climate is vote, because it's going to be at that scale that we need to change.

**Audience:** Was there any discussion about eating and growing meat or animals to eat, and about the contribution that adds to the climate?

**Gonzalez:** Yes, I took part in some events that talked about deforestation, the agricultural system, things like that. But it was a discussion, not one of the big events. Just a side event.

**Plane:** I will say that when Matt and I teach climate change the students want to know what they can do. I say, "The easiest, number one thing that an individual can do to reduce their carbon footprint is to have a non-meat-based diet." That message gets across pretty well to the students, but some others say, "I'm not going to do that."

**Powell:** The nations are not there to talk about what the solutions will be. They are there to commit to doing something. The decisions made at COP are along the line of, "We will commit to spending money to do this, or we will commit to reducing global temperature, or to keeping global

temperatures below two degrees Celsius by 2040.” They don’t talk about how they’re going to do that. Each nation submits their own plan, what’s called a nationally determined contribution. And it can be whatever suits that country the most. But the treaty is not talking about what you have to do on this or that issue. All of that scientific work is an entirely different UN body called the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is the advisory body to the UNFCCC.

**Plane:** That was the big breakthrough at Paris in 2015, that each country can do their own thing as long as, collectively, it adds up to keeping the temperature rise to 2 and hopefully 1.5 degrees Celsius.

**Audience:** You noted the huge presence of observers associated with fossil fuel companies. Was there any attempt to hold accountable these huge multinational corporations and fossil fuel companies for the environmental devastation that they have carried out all over the world, especially in developing countries?

**Plane:** That was a frequent theme in the pavilions, especially for developing countries in South America. I heard it much less in the bigger sessions.

**Pupo:** The answer is, basically, no. The relationship between private corporations and governments is going to be super important for good reasons now, and not just on subsidizing fossil fuel companies to do whatever they want. The federal government can incentivize the development of different technologies, and all of these technologies are going to be coming from private corporations.

**Powell:** Since 1992, they barely got the words “fossil fuels” into the text. Nobody’s calling anyone out.

**Audience:** People say that technology is going to save us. Did anybody challenge that rhetoric?

**Powell:** No, because the technology to solve the problem exists now. Solar panels exist. Utility-scale offshore wind exists.

**Pupo:** Even the fuels exist, but they’re not used at the scale we need.

**Powell:** Yeah, and they’re not being subsidized like fossil fuels are being subsidized. It’s a decision that people have made not to adopt those technologies, rather than the world is waiting for them to exist. There are of course carbon capture technologies that aren’t commercial scale yet, and we have to figure how to scale those up. In the negotiating rooms, one of the things that I was impressed by is the level of urgency that they felt and communicated, and just their dedication to fixing this problem. I thought it would all be lies and obfuscation, but they were people who really wanted to change the world. However, you have eight billion people on the world, and they all want slightly different things. You have to make sure that they all go in the same general direction. It’s just really complicated. The problems come at the next level up, what they call the ministerial level. The negotiators finish their work, they prepare their documents, and the documents get sent up to the ministerial level. To the John Kerrys of the

world who are doing negotiations, or directly to presidents like Joe Biden. That's where it has broken down.

**Plane:** At the basic level of politics you have to get to consensus, and "I'm going to sacrifice" is not a popular campaign platform. So a promise to solve everything through technology avoids this. You see the same problem with sustainable development. Maybe it's not possible, but the promise that it might be possible is what gets everyone to agree.

**Audience:** How do you transition the economy to clean energy while at the same time ensure that those practices aren't contributing something negative?

**Pupo:** It's all about what's going to be worse. Build solar panels and transition to a cleaner economy, or let business as usual happen? We're always going to be using resources to make changes, but it will be better and cheaper in the long term to make these changes than to let the climate get to a catastrophic point where we're three degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. That is a much more expensive option. You need to spend money to save money.

**Audience:** I'm interested in the generation gap, the striking difference between those vested in power versus those forced to live with the consequences of others' actions. Could you say something about greenwashing, where people acknowledge climate change but delay action?

**Pupo:** Yeah, I think there is some greenwashing going on. It's a lot easier for a politician to say, "I'm going to fix this. I'm going to make this commitment that by 2050 we will be net zero, but I'll be out of office in two years and it won't be my problem anymore." And if I'm Joe Biden, I won't be around. It's the young people who are going to have to deal with this. That's just one of the youths' frustrations. I was talking to this one guy and his group's main thing was to give therapy to young people who have stress and anxiety about living in a world with climate change. Wow, that's telling.

**Plane:** We have this urgency that's felt keenly by the youngest generation, and then the oldest generation—the one that's in charge, so to speak, of COP—is the one that pledges by 2100 to do this, and by 2050 to do that. This is the frustration not only with the young folks, but with the developing countries and the small island states too. They say, "I don't want to know what you're going to do in 2050 or 2100 because we will be drowned by then. We have to address this now." It's one minute to midnight and the oldest generation is not acknowledging the urgency of the problem. That's essentially true. At the same time, I look at where we were with Kyoto (1997) and even at Paris (2015) and see how far we have come.

## NOTES

1. Zeke Hausfather and Piers Forster, "Analysis: Do COP26 Promises Keep Global Warming Below 2C?" CarbonBrief.org, November 10, 2021.