

# No COP for fishers

**As climate change continues to impact fishing communities, the international climate regime needs to do more to safeguard the community. At COP 26, it did not**

Last November, 120 world leaders and over 40,000 participants gathered in Glasgow for two weeks of meetings of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), a crucial opportunity to address the threats of global warming. Yet, even as representatives from shrinking island nations facing rising sea levels and countries where cyclonic disasters are becoming routine were taking centre stage at official negotiations and events, the global political community still seemed reluctant to take decisive action. Mia Mottley, prime minister of Barbados, laid down the situation clearly when she said in the first few days of the 26th session of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP 26): “A 2° Celsius rise in temperature would be a ‘death sentence’ for island nations. We can work with whoever is ready to go, because the train is ready to leave.”

Advisory groups and scientists have made it clear that immediate action to reduce emissions and improve adaptation methods is the need of the hour. A case in point is the recent assessment report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released on 28 February 2022. It states that fishers are among the most vulnerable communities affected by climate-driven changes in marine resources and ecosystem services.

The report observes that rising sea levels, increases in sea-surface temperatures, ocean acidification and changes in the distribution of fish stocks are all having an extremely adverse impact on fishers, especially small-scale fishers. The jury is still out on whether the global political community is taking these warnings as seriously as it should.

## Business as usual

Even though the issue of fishers, let alone small-scale fishers, was not explicitly addressed, the climate summit in Glasgow did provide a stage for announcements of funding, mitigation and adaptation targets, especially emissions reduction pledges by nations and groups of countries. If acted on, these can potentially control global warming, to an extent.

Several key decisions were made at the summit. All parties to the UNFCCC are expected to provide improved Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) later this year at the 27th summit in Egypt. It was ultimately acknowledged in the final COP decision that fossil fuels are a cause of global warming. Even though this is apparent, it was the first time that fossil fuels were named in a COP decision since the signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. The proportion of climate finance

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is set to be doubled by 2025, and 104 countries promised to cut their methane emissions by signing a ‘methane pledge’. (Methane is a powerful greenhouse gas that traps heat 28 times more effectively than carbon dioxide in the short term. Agriculture—mainly livestock farming—the energy sector and landfills are the largest emitters.)

Despite the few successes at COP 26, on the whole, it was a missed opportunity. At the end of the summit, the planet remained on a path to warm by 2.4° Celsius on average this

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Plenary session at COP 26 in Glasgow. Rising sea levels, increases in sea-surface temperatures, ocean acidification and changes in the distribution of fish stocks are all having an extremely adverse impact on fishers, especially small-scale fishers

century. This dissonance between the ground reality of climate-change impacts on fishing and other vulnerable communities, and the general tenor of multilateral negotiations is by no means unique to the Glasgow summit. Marine-conservation agendas that overemphasize unsustainable fisheries over other threats to the health of ocean and coastal communities have made the world's fishers invisible in the eyes of the powers that decide on global climate action.

Vatasoa Rakotondrazaf is the president of the board of trustees of Madagascar's Mihari network, which empowers small-scale fishers to undertake fisheries co-management and community-led conservation measures. "I think fishers are not much represented," she said at the summit in Glasgow. "I saw some indigenous people but I don't

think coastal communities are well represented here, even though they are affected quite badly by climate change." Madagascar has been at the forefront of climate change-driven impacts in recent years, witnessing record droughts as well as increasing number of flooding events and severe tropical cyclones. The country has also been in the news because the UN has been warning that Madagascar is on the brink of the world's first 'climate change-induced famine', stating that more than 1.3 mn people could be in a food-security crisis as a result.

Rakotondrazaf is seeing this unfold in her country. "I would say fishers are afraid of the climate crisis. They are afraid for their future generations. They are vulnerable and they don't have the capacity to tackle it. We need to train them on climate adaptation and involve them in mitigation activities. The effect

of climate change on the world's fishers should be acknowledged," she said.

After an eventful conference that saw many ups and downs and dramatic (though non-binding) announcements from heads of state, the Glasgow Climate Pact was finally passed. In one of the final sessions of the COP, before the main decisions were finalized, a delegate from New Zealand said: "The text we have here in front of us is far from satisfying and it does not go far enough. Having said that, this is the least worst outcome since not having an outcome at all would mean that there is complete inaction against climate change for one more year."

In this 'least worst' text of the Glasgow Climate Pact, the oceans find mention four times. The text notes the "importance of ensuring the integrity of all ecosystems, including in forests, the ocean and the cryosphere". The text also welcomed the UNFCCC's scientific and technological body's reports on the ocean, climate change and how to strengthen adaptation and mitigation action. It also invited appropriate bodies within the UNFCCC system to strengthen ocean-based action in their existing mandates. Finally, the text asked for the UNFCCC's scientific and technological body to strengthen ocean-based action.

As can be seen, the decisions at Glasgow do not adequately address the impacts of climate change on ocean health or fishing communities, or how these communities can be included in the fight against anthropogenic climate change. Often, marine-conservation measures have tended to marginalize traditional fishing communities, citing the impacts of destructive fishing on ecosystems and species.

"I think activism around oceans in the North has been driven for a long time by this neat separation between humanity and the ocean. A lot of contemporary activism is also moving towards marine protected areas (MPAs), not eating seafood, etc.," said Siddharth Chakravarty, associated with the National Platform for Small-Scale Fish Workers (NPSSF), India. He was in Glasgow to attend the People's Summit for Climate Justice, a gathering of civil society alongside the COP meetings.

"That is the viewpoint coming through at events like the COP," he added.

### Talking fisheries AND climate change

In international fisheries and environmental processes, such as in the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and in the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), climate-change impacts are increasingly recognized for their interlinked effects on biodiversity loss, food security and fisheries livelihoods.

Regardless of their representation in global climate talks, fishers—especially small-scale fishers—face catastrophic impacts from the climate crisis in the marine environment. "Rises in temperature and ocean acidification are leading to a collapse of fisheries in many regions. Both these phenomena affect fish metabolism," said Soumya Dutta, co-convenor of South Asian Peoples Action on Climate Crisis (SAPACC) and a member of advisory board of the UN Climate Technology Centre and Network. Dutta and Chakravarty were panellists in what was probably the only event in Glasgow connecting fishers and climate change. Even this was at the People's Summit for Climate Justice, not in the official summit.

For the next UN climate summit in 2022, which is set to be an 'Africa COP', civil society organizations are hoping that governments negotiate some serious action to protect the most vulnerable populations, keeping climate justice at the forefront. Climate change could have devastating consequences for fishing communities, as is true for all livelihoods that depend extensively on natural resources. The further that concerted action to deal with global warming is delayed, the greater the challenges will be for fishers and fishworkers, particularly in the global South, to continue practicing their traditional livelihoods. ♻️

#### For more



#### COP26: Together for our planet

<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop26>

#### The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability

<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

#### The Glasgow Climate Pact

[https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cop26\\_auv\\_2f\\_cover\\_decision.pdf](https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cop26_auv_2f_cover_decision.pdf)