

The Nordic countries at COP 26 - lofty rhetoric, questionable ambitions

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“COP26 must be the moment that the world comes together to deliver decisive action to protect our planet. During COP26 we want to inspire faster, more ambitious action from all countries, and all of society, that will help us keep alive the crucial Paris Agreement goal of limiting global temperature rises to 1.5°C.”

– Alok Sharma, COP26 President

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its Parties. After a one-year forced break due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the international climate conference marked its 26th anniversary this year. Between 31 October and 12 November 2021, approximately 40,000 country representatives, UN envoys, and observers, including NGOs, lobbyists, activists, and media representatives from 200 countries convened in Glasgow, Scotland, to debate the Paris Climate Agreement's continued implementation (UNFCCC, 2021). The conference was organised by the UK government in cooperation with the Italian government.

One week after the G20 Summit in Rome, expectations were high due to the recent expiration of the deadline for submitting new, more ambitious climate plans established in the Paris Climate Agreement's "Nationally Determined Contributions." By 12 October 2021, about 70% of signatories would have presented new or updated national plans for implementing the Paris Agreement. This equates to approximately 57% of all global emissions that must be decreased in order to meet the agreement's 1.5 degree objective (WRI, 2021).

The Nordics act as climate pioneers - just like all other countries

At this COP all Nordic countries were represented by their government representatives and several exhibition stands. "Pioneering the possible" was the title of the Swedish pavilion hosted by Business Sweden, a slogan based on a communication concept developed by other partner organisations of the Team Sweden network led by the Swedish Institute to attract Swedish exports and investments as well as talent (Sharing Sweden, n.d.). Norway, in collaboration with the Bellona Foundation, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and various programs, pushed "Accelerate & Scale," while Denmark encouraged public-private partnerships through "Denmark 2030 - Climate Partnerships for a Greener Future." The message was clear: The Nordic nations support international climate negotiations and want to be climate pioneers themselves via creative thinking and rapid implementation of innovative solutions on a wide scale in collaboration with their partners.

Additionally, the Nordic Council of Ministers sponsored two pavilions: a pavilion on Nordic perspectives with the slogan "Choosing Green" and the "Cryosphere Pavilion," a joint pavilion with the Scottish government, the Bolin Center for Climate Research at Stockholm University, the international Cryosphere Climate Initiative, ICIMOD, Giveone, and Svenska Postkod Stiftelsen that focused primarily on the IPCC Sixth Assessment (AR6) Report's findings. Finland was not represented by a pavilion, but instead sponsored its own festival in Helsinki (Nordic Co-operation, 2021). However, the Nordic nations were not alone in presenting themselves as climate pioneers on the path to a green economy. Other nations, such as the United Arab Emirates with "accelerating innovation in agricultural and food systems," Korea with the "Korean Green Deal," and France with "a decade for a green world," all highlighted their intentions to lead the transformation by innovation.

The Nordics are sure of their ambitions - despite dubious promises

The end of fossil fuel consumption was a strongly discussed subject during the conference. Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven had previously emphasized in his opening remarks: "Sweden committed in 2017 to become the first fossil-free welfare nation by 2045. We intend to keep that promise." (Swedish Government, 2021). His message is straightforward: the transition is possible provides several opportunities to build a better society. Löfven cited numerous good instances, including fossil-free steel manufacturing, circular business models, and transportation electrification. While Sweden has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 50% since 1990 (EEA, 2019), it nevertheless continues to struggle with so-called spill over effects¹ which casts doubt on their global sustainability ambitions (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017).

Nevertheless, Löfven mentions that the country also intends to assist low-income nations by doubling its climate finance to USD 1.75 billion by 2025. Simultaneously, Löfven urged other governments to work together to meet the USD 100 billion objective and to utilize next year's Stockholm+50 conference as a follow-up to COP26. Appropriately, Denmark has committed to mobilize 1% of the total funding target by 2023. (UNFCCC, 2021c). Norway's Social Democratic Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre also committed USD1.6 billion in financial assistance to low-income nations by 2026 to help them transition to renewable energy and phase out fossil fuels (Regjeringen, 2021). The new "Climate Investment Initiative" is designed to finance these nations' transition to renewable energy. However, being the third biggest supplier of natural gas (behind Russia and Qatar) and covering around 2% of world oil consumption, which together account for about 42% of its exports, Norway's declared climate objectives should be questioned (Norwegian Petroleum, 2021). Within Norway, however, there is also good news for the climate: in 2020, it became the first country to sell more electric cars than petrol cars in a year (Reuters, 2021). They are closely followed by Iceland, where in the same year almost 50 % of newly registered vehicles

¹ The spillover effect is a term that refers to the influence that seemingly unconnected events in one country might have on the economy of surrounding countries.

were either electric or hybrid (Iceland Review, 2020).

Climate neutrality was another a key theme during COP26. India, for instance, has set a goal of becoming carbon neutral by 2070. Krista Mikkonen, Finland's Green Minister for Environment and Climate Change, criticized distant climate neutrality aspirations, stressing that major emissions reductions are required before 2030. (Yle, 2021). Finland aspires to achieve climate neutrality by 2035. (Finnish Ministry of the Environment, n.d.). Nevertheless, among other things, it is dependent on nuclear energy growth, which is expected to account for up to 60% of its electricity supply in the near future (World Nuclear Association, 2021). Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen reiterated in her opening remarks her country's goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 70% by 2030. (UNFCCC, 2021c). Additionally, the autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark Faroe Islands were drafting their own climate contribution to the Paris Agreement in compliance with the Paris Agreement's provisions. While Frederiksen lauded Greenland's decision to phase out oil and gas extraction in her speech this year, she made no mention of Denmark's role as the EU's largest oil producer or of Denmark's plans to phase out oil and gas production in the North Sea only by 2050. (Time, 2021; BBC, 2020). Whereas Iceland announced plans to enhance its target for greenhouse emission reductions from 40% to 55% by 2030. (UNFCCC, 2021a). This is consistent with the EU's ambitions and the EU's Green Deal (European Council, 2021). The country aspires to achieve carbon neutrality officially by 2040 and to phase out fossil fuels entirely by 2050. (UNFCCC, 2021a). With the highest per capita emissions of any Nordic country, this is undoubtedly not an easy task (EEA, 2019). It is encouraging to note that around 85 percent of its energy is already generated by renewable sources, including geothermal and hydropower (Icelandic Ministry of Industries and Innovation, n.d.).

Greenland, as another autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark, had already dominated the conference's opening headlines. Múte Bourup Egede, Greenland's Prime Minister, announced in the Nordic Pavilion that his country will join the Paris Climate Agreement. He explained the decision by stating: "The Arctic region is one of the areas on our planet where the effects of global warming is felt the most, and we believe that we must take responsibility collectively. That means that we too, must contribute our share." (Government of Greenland, 2021). Additionally, the Finnish Prime Minister emphasized that "if we lose the Arctic, we lose the globe. (UNFCCC, 2021b). This action reaffirmed Greenland's commitment to climate protection, despite the fact that this pledge is based, among other things, on a study stating that Greenland is not required to make "any specified commitment to cut CO2 emissions" (Government of Greenland, 2021). Greenland has already agreed to halt new oil and gas exploration licenses on its territory in 2020, at the price of future investments that would have increased its economic independence from Denmark (Time, 2021).

The resolution to halt global deforestation by 2030 was a fairly dubious triumph of the summit (BBC, 2021). Among the more than 100 signatories are also countries that contain around 85 percent of the world's forests, such as Brazil, Russia, and Canada. The promise comprises USD 19.2

billion in funding from both public and private sources. Iceland stated in this context, "We need to stop devouring forests and wetlands that are valuable carbon sinks and bastions of biodiversity." (UNFCCC, 2021a). Finnish President Sauli Niinistö emphasized in his national statement that Finland contributes valuable experience and knowledge in forest policy in the context of economic profitability and concurrent climate change mitigation. He stressed that "the equation is not impossible". Considering that wood as a resource is expected to play a significant role in the future, for example in the replacement of fossil products such as plastics, one can only hope that other nations will be inspired by Finland's efforts to develop sustainable forestry practices.

Nordics want and should strengthen their climate measures - at home and globally

Thorsten Krause of Lund University concisely summarizes the necessary measures using deforestation as an example. The true causes of deforestation (in supply chains) must be addressed: "As long as consumption and demand-side issues are not addressed we are just displacing deforestation to other countries or displacing biodiversity loss and degradation to other ecosystems". Otherwise, this would only result in a rerouting of the issue. The elephant in the room is the consumption and exchange of commodities such as palm oil, pharmaceuticals, and infrastructure projects (LUCSUS, 2021).

This is undoubtedly true for other resources as well. The request for complete abstinence or withdrawal from resource consumption is implausible, given our civilization's reliance on it. The ultimate innovation is in discovering the most responsible and efficient way to use resources, such as through the usage of a circular economy. While the Nordic countries want to be role models in this regard, they also display a reluctance to abandon fossil fuels in the process. Transferring emissions to other nations is unsustainable from a global greenhouse gas inventory perspective, much more so if the Nordic countries seek to maintain their reputation as climate pioneers. To ensure true sustainable development and global climate protection, it is hoped that the Nordic countries take seriously the words of the Nordic Council of Ministers' Secretary General, Paulo Lehtomäki: "The Nordic countries are committed to ambitious climate goals - at home and globally" (UNFCCC, 2021d).

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