



YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS AMIDST COVID-19

IMPLICATIONS OF THE COP26 POSTPONEMENT

POLICY BRIEF - MEG SOMERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was widely considered a pivotal year for climate change. [1] However, with political energies focused on containing and fighting COVID-19, dealing with the existential threat posed by climate change has moved down on national priority lists worldwide.

The secondary nature of climate change to COVID-19 was aptly expressed on 1 April 2020, when the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) announced that the UN's 26th Climate Conference, COP26, had been postponed until an undetermined date in 2021, as a result of the pandemic. [2]

The postponement of COP26 provides Australia with a unique opportunity to step up as a global leader on climate policy. The annual pressure and spotlight of multilateral climate change conferences are alleviated this year, leaving the responsibility to act in the hands of national leaders. After being ranked the sixth worst-performing country in the 2020 Climate Change Performance Index, [3] it is imperative that Australia works to shift its damaged reputation on the world stage and improve already strained diplomatic relations with climate-affected nations in the South Pacific. [4]

BACKGROUND

The effects of climate change are being felt all around the world. Significant and visible impacts include rapidly receding Arctic ice, more frequent bushfires, longer periods of drought, and an increase in the number and intensity of natural disasters across the globe. [5]

Worryingly, the threat posed by climate change is not only limited to environmental implications. Research has shown that climate change acts as a threat multiplier in our already precariously balanced globalised world. [6] The risk of nuclear attacks, terrorism, resource scarcity conflicts, food insecurity, and large-scale human migration are all heightened by the effects of climate change. [7]

The security threat posed by climate change is echoed in the voices of military, political, and environmental experts worldwide. The Global Military Advisory Council on Climate Change (GMACCC), a global network of military officers committed to highlighting climate change security implications, captured this in its first joint statement.

The Council warned that the “failure to recognise the conflict and instability implications of climate change and to invest in a range of preventative and adaptive actions will be very costly in terms of destabilising nations, causing human suffering, retarding development and providing the required military response”. [8] This and other pleas from leaders and organisations highlight the urgent need for countries to take action on climate change.

The UNFCCC encourages multilateral cooperation on climate change from its 197 parties [9] through the use of collective pressure and accountability embodied in its annual conferences, where countries are urged to evaluate and improve their climate ambitions. [10] The annual COPs demonstrate the way the global community is working together to respond to climate change and shine a spotlight on the individual performance of each country.

THE PROBLEM

The United Nations 26th COP was designed to produce an international response to the climate emergency and for the first time, world governments were set to discuss and review commitments under the Paris Agreement established at the COP21 in 2015.

A 2016 UN Environment Report established that current commitments under the Paris Agreement will be insufficient in reducing emissions by the amount needed to avoid future catastrophic consequences. [12] This report reinforced the importance and urgency behind the COP26 and the global climate crisis response.

Despite the postponement due to COVID-19, countries are still being asked to submit their national climate plans by the end of 2020 in an effort to continue climate action and ambition throughout the pandemic. [13] However, there are concerns that countries will reduce their action and ambitions in the absence of the collective pressure and accountability presented by the COP.

Evidence of the critical nature of these conferences can be seen in the binding commitments of the 2005 Kyoto Protocol and voluntary commitments of the 2015 Paris Agreement which were both established at these conferences. However, it is important to acknowledge that the COPs have only been effective to a limited extent.

Many voluntary emission reduction measures have not been met, and the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement has reduced the success of UN Climate Conferences. [14] Nonetheless, multilateral climate conferences increase accountability and encourage global climate action. They are an essential part of the 21st century global climate response and the absence of a 2020 COP is highly problematic.

Aside from the aforementioned COP26 postponement, this pandemic has also had drastic economic consequences worldwide. In Australia, the June quarter is expected to bring an 8.5 per cent contraction in gross domestic product and employment rates are expected to peak at 17 per cent. [15] Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed economic growth, with companies generating far less revenue than before the pandemic. Consequently, a global recession is imminent.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 **Introduce post-pandemic, climate-friendly policies to benefit the Australian economy**

The impending recession will require governments to seek new sources of economic growth, which can be filled through green economic policies. [16] Globally, many governments are expected to use the economic shock caused by COVID-19 as an opportunity to introduce and amend a raft of policies.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been enormous in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that almost seven in ten businesses (69 per cent) Australia-wide are experiencing a reduced demand for goods and services. [17]

Australia should adopt a future-focused approach and introduce climate-friendly policies in its rejuvenation of the economy. Incorporating climate change in initial considerations for investment and economic recovery efforts could kickstart Australian green manufacturing and other innovation linked with sustainability.

These efforts could be followed by further climate change policies, such as emissions trading schemes or carbon taxes, to ensure that Australia's work on climate change is sustained into the future.

Notably, climate-related investments are expected to offer the best prospects for economic growth and jobs in many cases. [18] Additionally, with low borrowing costs, governments and the private sector globally are in a unique position to invest in renewables. As the Australian economy builds towards recovery, it is essential that new policies focus on maximising economic growth and jobs.

Such action will not only kickstart the Australian economy but could also improve Australia's diplomatic relations with the South Pacific, shift the global perception of Australia from a "climate laggard" [19] to a climate action leader, and significantly reduce Australia's carbon emissions.

2

Facilitate a virtual climate conference in the interim

Australia should work with the United Kingdom, host of the COP26, to deliver a virtual climate conference for world leaders. Although not a replacement of the COP, this conference could provide an opportunity for parties to discuss environmental plans in the interim and encourage accountability towards environmental obligations during the pandemic.

Australia's strong diplomatic relationships position it well to co-host an international conference on climate change, in turn suggesting that the global community would be open to Australia coordinating such a conference. As a middle power, Australia possesses the bilateral relationships, technology, and workforce to facilitate a virtual climate conference. This provides an opportunity for Australia to improve its reputation in the region and strengthen its influence globally. Furthermore, hosting a virtual climate conference would adhere to Australia's foreign policy commitments of multilateralism and regionalism.

Australia's effective response to the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights its capability to act as a global leader. Strict social distancing measures, a coordinated pandemic approach across states, and stability within civil society have limited the spread of COVID-19 in Australia and kept casualties relatively low. [20] The effective control of this crisis means that Australia may be able to direct some of its political energies towards facilitating a virtual multilateral climate conference.

Holding the proposed virtual conference in the near future is not feasible for many countries that are still dealing with the worst of the pandemic. However, Australia should present a clear, streamlined approach to the virtual conference and offer to facilitate it in late 2020 to ensure most of the parties to the UNFCCC are able to participate.

CONCLUSION

As the biggest threat facing humanity over the long-term, climate change requires a coordinated and sustained international emergency response. [21] The COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably impacted climate progress, most notably with the postponement of the COP26 Climate Conference.

This pandemic presents a unique opportunity for Australia to improve its reputation on the world stage by taking climate action at a time when political energies are focused on the COVID-19 response. Countries must continue to increase their climate ambition and decrease their emissions during and after the pandemic.

Australia should step up as a global climate leader, implement the proposed policy recommendations, and remind countries that crises do not pause because another begins. It is imperative that world leaders focus on both the health and climate crises.

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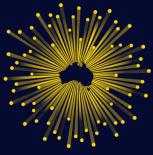
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