

Returning Home from COP26: Fresh Perspective and Energy
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A mural that was part of one of the daily protests at the entrance to the venue

COP26 was totally overwhelming: thousands of people attending thousands of events on every aspect of the climate crisis on a maze-like campus with a hefty stack of COVID and diplomatic protocols. Now that the dust has settled, however, I am left with a fresh perspective on climate change and fresh energy to address it.



Part of the COP pavilion where diverse groups of attendees could meet causally throughout the day

COP was a much more emotional experience than I had anticipated a technical UN conference might be. There was at least one moment each day I was there that stopped me in my tracks and filled me with feeling. One in particular stands out: a [speech](#) from the representative of Niue, a tiny island nation off the coast of Australia that is home to 1,260 people. He reminded the assembly that Niue emits almost nothing, but went on to detail plans to double the island's solar energy by 2025 and create vast marine protected areas--plans more ambitious than those of many of the wealthiest countries in attendance. These actions will mean nothing if the rest of the world does not step up, a truth he made devastatingly clear at the end of his remarks: "In the end, you are free to choose but we all are not free from the consequences of your choices."

Developing nations, and small island states in particular, can often be tokenized on the world stage, held up as sad examples of what will happen if the rest of us don't

act. At COP, however, I was struck by their power to drive the conversation. The conference was a chance for the countries that will be most affected by climate change to confront the biggest emitters and demand they do better.

My own background on climate change is centered on China's position in international climate negotiations and its relationship with the U.S. From this vantage point, I have focused primarily on the importance of mitigation. Attending COP woke me up to the importance of adaptation, and the yawning finance gaps for developing nations to adjust to the inevitable impacts of a warming planet. I have always conceived emissions reductions as the most important currency when it comes to fighting climate change, when for many countries cash is just as important. This theme was driven home by developing nations' insistence that half of all climate finance be dedicated to adaptation, as well as their push for a loss and damage finance mechanism (dedicated funding for disaster recovery from inevitable climate events). It seems obvious in retrospect, but witnessing the frustration of countries like Panama and the Marshall Islands at the mere billions being thrown at a multi-trillion dollar problem brought to life a whole other aspect of the challenge for me.

Attending COP also complicated my perception of the U.S.'s role in the negotiations. I have never seen the U.S. as a particularly progressive actor on climate change, a source of frustration and some shame for many of my generation. Nevertheless, I could appreciate the key role the U.S. has played in bringing China on board to global climate governance and laying the groundwork for the Paris Agreement and now the Glasgow Climate Pact. While I was encouraged by the U.S.-China bilateral announcement on short-term climate ambition in the final days of the negotiations, being there in person laid bare embarrassing gaps in the U.S. position on other issues. The delegation's continued refusal to agree to a loss and damage funding mechanism to compensate countries for the inevitable impacts of climate change (many of which the U.S. is responsible for due to our historic emissions) is not what strong leadership should look like. I hope to spend part of my time at Fletcher studying how the U.S. could be more proactive in this area given the heavy domestic political constraints around admitting any responsibility for "climate reparations."



Posing as a member of the U.S. delegation

There were moments at COP where I felt paralyzed by what the world could look like when I'm in my 40s. But there were just as many instances where I was energized by the diversity, creativity, and tenacity of the individuals there, from activists to delegates to observers like myself. I have much to learn still when it comes to successful global climate governance, but I have returned home with a more holistic view of the challenge, the first step on the road to contributing to a solution.