UN climate talks failing to address urgency of crisis, says top scientist

COP25 in Madrid criticised for focusing on details instead of agreeing deep cuts to emissions

Fiona Harvey

in Madrid

Sun 8 Dec 2019 18.21 GMT

Last modified on Sun 8 Dec 2019 18.54 GMT

Urgent UN talks on tackling the climate emergency are still not addressing the true scale of the crisis, one of the world’s leading climate scientists has warned, as high-ranking ministers from governments around the world began to arrive in Madrid for the final days of negotiations.

Talks are focusing on some of the rules for implementing the 2015 Paris agreement, but the overriding issue of how fast the world needs to cut greenhouse gas emissions has received little official attention.

“We are at risk of getting so bogged down in incremental technicalities at these negotiations that we forget to see the forest for the trees,” said Johan Rockström, joint director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. “There is a risk of disappointment in the UN process because of the inability to recognise that there is an emergency.”

In the next few days, environment and finance ministers from more than 190 governments will begin the “high-level segment” of the UN talks, which began on 2 December, and will finish on Friday. Over the weekend, negotiators produced the latest draft of a key text on carbon markets, which still does not have the consensus needed to pass.

The stately pace of negotiations was in stark contrast with the scenes outside the conference in Madrid, where on Friday evening more than 500,000 people marched through the Spanish capital led by the Swedish school striker Greta Thunberg. Protests continued through the weekend, with Extinction Rebellion and groups from across the world. On Monday, Thunberg and other youth activists will hold meetings with officials inside the conference.

Rockström said the UN conference must grapple urgently with reversing emissions of greenhouse gases, which are still on the rise despite repeated scientific warnings over three decades and multiple resolutions by governments to tackle the problem.

“We must bend the curve next year,” he told the Guardian, citing stark warnings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. “Next year is the year of truth. The year when we must move decisively to an economy that really starts to reduce investments in fossil fuels.”

Even the coal-fired power plants currently planned or in construction are enough to produce double the amount of carbon that can safely be put in the atmosphere for the next century, Rockström said.

The situation was so dire that governments should be starting to consider geoengineering technology, he said. Such projects could use a combination of natural and artificial means, from seeding clouds to erecting reflectors in space.

“Geoengineering has to be assessed, maybe even piloted already in case we need to deploy it,” he said. “It makes me very nervous. That is really playing with biological processes that might kick back in very unexpected ways. But I don’t think we should rule anything out – an emergency is an emergency.”

As the UN conference enters its final stages, the role of the UK is likely to come under much greater scrutiny. Britain will play host to next year’s conference at which world leaders must pledge much greater cuts in emissions than have yet been made, if the 2015 Paris accord is to succeed.

Claire O’Neill, the former Tory climate minister designated to lead next year’s conference, is in Madrid but cannot make official announcements because of the “purdah” rules surrounding political announcements in the run-up to the general election.

However, the UK’s plans were rated as “insufficient” in a key independent analysis called the Climate Action Tracker. Despite the government’s eye-catching commitment last summer to cut carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 – one of the first major economies to make such a pledge – few measures are in place to keep pace with the target.

The UN conference move shows global heating plus inequality is a recipe for chaos

Maisa Rojas

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“There has been a dearth of new significant climate policies in recent years which, if left unaddressed, will leave the UK missing its medium and long-term targets,” concluded the analysis of global emissions-cutting plans.

That would damage the host nation’s credibility at next year’s crucial talks in Glasgow, campaigners said.
Dr Bill Hare, a climate scientist and the chief executive of Climate Analytics, which carried out the study, said it was clear which of the two biggest parties had the better plans on the issue before this week’s general election.

“While both major political parties have proposed further climate action, the Conservatives have not put sufficient proposals on the table to close this gap, whereas [our analysis shows] the Labour’s £250bn could easily close that gap and push on towards a 1.5C pathway,” Hare said.

**COP25 climate summit: put children at heart of tackling crisis, says UN**

Young activists including Greta Thunberg put pressure on negotiators to break deadlock

Fiona Harvey in Madrid

Mon 9 Dec 2019 18.33 GMT

Last modified on Mon 9 Dec 2019 18.52 GMT

Children and young people must be at the heart of dealing with the climate crisis, the UN and campaigners have said as climate talks in Madrid enter their second week with little concrete progress.

Young people, including Greta Thunberg, played a leading role in protests at COP25 over the weekend, and on Monday appeared at the conference to put pressure on negotiators to come up with a plan for reducing greenhouse gases and tackling the impacts of climate breakdown.

Penelope Lea, a 15-year old from Norway, was the first climate activist chosen to be a Unicef ambassador. She said: “We need to keep giving the decisionmakers the power to make the changes we need to see. People have a right to knowledge, and an obligation to get knowledge. Some say we have to wait for people to get ready for change. But we need to make people ready. These are some of the things the youth movement is trying to do, and have to do to ensure progress at COP25.”

She spoke as governments including the intended conference host Chile, the co-hosts Costa Rica and Spain, and several other countries signed up to an international declaration that the climate emergency was a crisis for the rights of children. The organisers, including Unicef, hope this will encourage countries to include special consideration for children in their climate action plans.

Michelle Bachelet, the UN high commissioner for human rights, applauded the young activists. “I understand the despair and rage that so many young people and older ones too are feeling. All of us know the facts and so far there has been far too little real action. Children and young people have a right to participate. We need to implement the principle of intergenerational equity that the Paris agreement sets out.”

Mary Robinson, a former president of Ireland, said: “The children have called out the adult world, called us out very effectively, as this is a grave injustice. When I was growing up I did not have that shadow of climate breakdown. It’s not fair that we have made children have that fear.”

Unicef warned that climate breakdown would reverse the gains made in recent years in protecting children and enshrining their rights in law.

More than 500 million children live in areas judged to be at extremely high risk of floods, due to cyclones, hurricanes, storms and rising sea levels. In the Caribbean alone, the number of children displaced by extreme weather events has risen sixfold in five years, with more than 760,000 children displaced between 2014 and 2018.

**Timeline**

Half a century of dither and denial – a climate crisis timeline

More than 160 million children are living in areas with high levels of drought, with severe impacts on their development and exposure to disease. That number is expected to rise dramatically, so that on current trends as many as one in four children around the world will live in areas of extreme water stress, according to the UN.

Diseases, including mosquito-borne illnesses such as malaria and dengue fever, are forecast to spread to new areas as a result of global heating. Children under five are likely to be most at risk.

Air pollution, which is made worse by coal-burning power stations, fossil fuels burned for transport and biomass burning in homes without clean energy sources, also hurts children disproportionately. Breathing toxic air can stunt children’s lungs permanently, and has a long-term impact on their health, brain function and development.
Toxic air contributes to the deaths of about 600,000 deaths of children under five every year, from pneumonia and other respiratory problems. But the measures needed to tackle the climate crisis – replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy, creating green spaces and planting trees – would also help to clean up dirty air.

Gautam Narasimhan, a senior adviser on climate change, energy and environment at Unicef, said: “From hurricanes to droughts to floods to wildfires, the consequences of the climate crisis are all around us, affecting children the most and threatening their health, education, protection and very survival. Children are essential actors in responding to the climate crisis. We owe it to them to put all our efforts behind solutions we know can make a difference.”

02 DECEMBER 2019

Carbon markets shape agenda at UN climate summit

The COP25 discussions also face a backdrop of uncertain geopolitics and intensifying public pressure.

Four years after pledging to limit global warming to no more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels, representatives of nearly 200 countries are meeting this week to put the finishing touches to the 2015 Paris climate accord.

Discussions at the annual United Nations' climate conference, COP25, are expected to focus on international carbon markets, which have the potential to reduce the overall cost of global climate-mitigation efforts.

But the talks, which start today in Madrid and last until 13 December, also take place against a backdrop of shifting geopolitics that has created uncertainty over who will lead global efforts to tackle climate change, and of intensifying public pressure on governments to take action.

Despite pledges to curb emissions, atmospheric greenhouse-gas concentrations reached a new peak in 2018, the World Meteorological Organization said last week. A UN climate report released on 26 November warns that the Paris agreement’s 2°C goal might soon be out of reach as emissions continue to rise.

“Remaining countries must reassert their will to get on, and accelerate the pace of action, despite mounting challenges,” says Bob Ward, policy and communications director at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment in London.
**Unfinished business**

At last year’s conference, nations agreed on a set of rules for tracking and reporting greenhouse-gas emissions and for reviewing collective progress. However, they failed to establish clear rules around carbon markets through which emissions made in one country can be offset by investing in low-carbon technologies elsewhere. Although it is unclear whether negotiators will be able to reach agreement this time around, Article 6 of the Paris agreement — which aims to promote voluntary international cooperation between nations — is a central point on the agenda, and offsetting will almost certainly be discussed.

Voluntary offsetting schemes are already in use to make certain goods and services, such as passenger flights, ‘carbon neutral’. Many countries, including New Zealand, Sweden and the United Kingdom, rely to some extent on offsetting to achieve their emission-reduction goals.

Critics say that offsetting schemes allow rich countries to dodge responsibility for cutting their own emissions. But a well-organized international carbon market with clear, practical rules could save up to US$250 billion in climate-mitigation costs, says Stefano De Clara, a policy adviser at the International Emissions Trading Association in Brussels. “It would engage businesses in climate action and facilitate the linkage of existing carbon pricing systems,” he says. “In the end, everyone could be better off through collaboration.”

Analysts have warned that poorly planned offsetting schemes could actually hinder efforts to curb global emissions. Under the Paris agreement, countries must adjust their emission-reduction pledges every five years, in line with new scientific evidence about what will be required to stabilize the climate. Without proper rules and bookkeeping, offsetting could simply move emission-reduction efforts around the world, instead of reducing overall emissions, says Gilles Dufrasne, an environmental economist with the Brussels-based international climate policy watchdog Carbon Market Watch.

Jacob Werksman, a climate-policy adviser at the European Commission, warns that there are some sticking points that negotiators in Madrid might not be able to resolve. For example, some countries expect that excess carbon credits from the expiring 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the previous international climate treaty, will remain eligible for use under the Paris agreement. Such a concession would “severely undermine” the agreement, Werksman says.

**Political climate**

This year’s talks are also facing intense public scrutiny. The rapidly growing climate-protest movement, which has taken centre stage in recent months, is changing the overall conversation on climate change, says Valèrie Masson-Delmotte, a co-chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Politics are shifting, too. The United States’ official withdrawal from the Paris agreement puts the nation in a strange position for this year’s talks. It will remain a member of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, an international treaty under which both the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris agreement were negotiated. And US representatives will still attend future COP meetings — including next year’s meeting in Glasgow, UK. But unless a new US government revokes the decision to quit the Paris agreement, the country will no longer participate in negotiations concerning the rules and implementation of the accord. The White House also announced in October that climate will not be on the agenda of the next G7 summit, due to take place in Florida next year.

Hopes for leadership rest on the European Union, says Oliver Geden, a policy researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin. On 28 November, the European Parliament voted to declare a ‘climate and environmental emergency’, a move that will put pressure on EU member states to approve the European Commission’s plans to cut emissions by 55% by 2030, and to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

“At this time it’s up to the EU to demonstrate that the Paris agreement can deliver after all,” says Geden. “That’s a tough nut to crack.”


doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-03695-x

**Greta Thunberg: 'They try so desperately to silence us'**

Matt McGrath

Environment correspondent
@mattmcgrathbbc
on Twitter

2 hours ago
Swedish activist Greta Thunberg says young people are "bringing change" to the Madrid climate talks and will not be silenced.

At a news conference Miss Thunberg said that she hoped the negotiations would yield "something concrete." The 16-year-old was mobbed by press and spectators when she visited the conference centre earlier on Friday. She had to be escorted away for her own safety amid shouts of "leave her alone" from concerned observers.

Having arrived via overnight train from Lisbon to large crowds waiting for her in Madrid, Miss Thunberg was set to join a large demonstration in favour of rapid climate action this evening.

Speaking before the gathering she said that the voices of the young would not be drowned out. "People want everything to continue like now and they are afraid of change," she told reporters. "And change is what we young people are bringing and that is why they want to silence us and that is just a proof that we are having an impact that our voices are being heard that they try so desperately to silence us."

Miss Thunberg is due to address the climate negotiations that have been going on in Madrid for the past week. She remains hopeful that they will lead to a positive outcome. "I sincerely hope that COP25 will lead to something concrete and it will lead to also to an increase in awareness in people in general and that the world leaders and people in power grab the urgency of the climate crisis because right now it doesn't seem like they are," she said.

"We will do everything we can to show that this is something that cannot be ignored, that they cannot just hide away any longer." Miss Thunberg has arrived in Europe after a voyage across the Atlantic by yacht.

The hope among many here is that the scale of the march and her speech to the COP next week will give a big boost to the talks process that seem badly in need of a lift. This COP started with great hope last Monday, with strong words from the UN secretary-general and others, warning that time is running out and that negotiators should be guided by the science.

Since then, the urgency has given way to frustration. Little obvious progress is being made on the central question of raising countries' ambitions to cut carbon. Indeed, UN climate chief Patricia Espinosa said the issue of increased pledges wasn't even on the agenda for the final outcome of this conference.

"We don't have in the agenda one item that's called 'ambition' and, therefore, it's not like we are expecting to have a specific decision on that." In the face of several recent scientific reports stating that countries were falling further behind when it came to meeting the Paris agreement targets, this was a little disturbing, to say the least.
According to some experts at these talks, extra ambition would be great but equally important would be a firm timetable to deliver their pledges over the next 12 months, ahead of the Glasgow COP this time next year.

"It would be extremely concerning if the countries here in Madrid did not agree that there is a timeline for next year in coming forward with their commitments," said David Waskow from the World Resources Institute.

"That is a key outcome that we have to see here. It is not something that you can keep punting further and further away, this is something that requires immediate action."

Even the Pope is concerned.

"We must seriously ask ourselves if there is the political will to allocate with honesty, responsibility and courage, more human, financial and technological resources to mitigate the negative effects of climate change," Pope Francis said in a message to participants here.

Even the Pope is concerned.

Much of what happens in Madrid could be governed by what happens in Brussels next week where a European Green Deal is set to be outlined by the incoming EU Commission.

"What the European Union does next week is a critical signal to the rest of the world that will shape the outcome in Madrid," said David Waskow. "What happens in Brussels will resonate in Madrid."

Another ongoing issue that is making people upset here is the question of climate justice.

Much attention has been focused on the attempts by poorer countries to finally get some traction around the question of loss and damage, the impacts of climate change from events that just can't be adapted to, such as sea-level rise or storms made more likely by rising temperatures.

The hope from many is that there are in Madrid, the developing nations would be heard and a mechanism with funding would be set up to deal with loss and damage.

Of course the question of climate justice is not just between countries but often within countries as well.

"The ones who contributed the most are the ones who feel the impacts the least," said Isadora Cardoso from campaign group GenderCC - women for climate justice.

"Even within developed countries the poorest are the most affected whenever there are climate disasters or impacts, but they are not the ones who consume more and contribute the most to the causes of climate change."

There is still time to ensure a strong outcome in Madrid and the arrival of ministers next week will increase the sense of urgency - but right now there's a big disconnect between the size of the task and the willingness of countries to step forward with the pledges and the money needed to deal with the biggest challenge facing Planet Earth.

Greta Thunberg: People underestimate 'angry kids'

Climate activist Greta Thunberg said that adults should stop making young people "angry" over global warming.

Ms Thunberg was speaking after her arrival in Lisbon, Portugal, after a two-weeks-plus journey across the Atlantic from her starting point in Virginia, US.

"People are underestimating the force of angry kids," she told reporters.

The 16-year-old is on her way to the COP25 climate summit in Madrid.

She is taking a stand on more polluting forms of transport by sailing, rather than flying or travelling in cars.

Responding to a question from a journalist who said some adults viewed her as "angry", Ms Thunberg said: "We are angry, we are frustrated and it's because of good reasons."

If they want us to stop being angry, maybe they should stop making us angry."

She had originally planned to travel from the US to a UN climate summit in Chile.

But the South American nation had to give up the event due to civil unrest.

The venue changed to Spain, and so Ms Thunberg hitched a ride on a 48ft sailing catamaran called La Vagabonde.

She travelled with Australian YouTubers Riley Whitlum and Elayna Carausu, as well as Briton Nikki Henderson - who is a professional yachtswoman.

Their boat uses solar panels and hydro-generators for power.

Meanwhile, in a report released on Tuesday during COP25, the World Health Organization (WHO) called on countries to prioritise funding to deal with the effects of climate change on human health. In coming decades, global warming is expected to cause thousands of additional deaths each year from malnutrition, insect-borne disease and heat stress.

WHO researchers surveyed 101 nations to find out which had already developed health and climate change strategies, and whether these plans had sufficient financial backing. It found about half of the surveyed countries had drawn up a national strategy. But of 45 countries subjected to more detailed analysis, less than 40% said their current health budget fully or partially covered the estimated costs of implementing their national plans. Only 9% had allocated enough resources to carry out their strategies in full.
STOCKHOLM (Reuters) - Greta Thunberg joined other young climate activists protesting outside the Swedish parliament on Friday for the first time since she embarked on a four-month overseas voyage to attend climate conferences in New York City and Madrid.
At the protest, taking place at the end of the school term in Sweden, activists presented a report card giving politicians an F for “failed” in tackling climate change at UN-led summits over the past decade and the verdict “Needs to try harder!”.
Thunberg, the 16-year-old Swede whose solo “School Strike for the Climate” outside parliament, begun in August 2018, swelled into the global Fridays for Future movement, took a low profile as other activists spoke.

“I would give them an F, actually. I know they did try, but they didn’t try hard enough,” activist Isabelle Axelsson, 18, told Reuters of politicians’ work on climate change this year.
Axelsson said she thought Fridays for Future deserved an A for effort, but added: “We haven’t accomplished convincing our politicians to act on climate, so I don’t think we should pass either, really.”
In 2020, weekly school strikes and larger protests aimed at persuading politicians to act would continue, she said.
Fridays for Future has seen millions of young people in more than 100 countries walk out of school on Fridays this year in support of Thunberg’s demands for urgent action from governments to curb carbon emissions.

After crisscrossing the globe by car, train and boat — but not plane — to demand action on climate change, Thunberg said as she was returning home from the COP25 climate summit in Madrid this week that she would take a break.

Reporting by Anna Ringstrom; Editing by Catherine Evans
European shipping emissions in way of nations meeting Paris climate targets

New report says greenhouse gas emissions equal carbon footprint of a quarter of passenger cars in Europe

Sandra Laville

Mon 9 Dec 2019 09.16 GMT
Last modified on Mon 9 Dec 2019 09.18 GMT

Greenhouse gas emissions from shipping equal the carbon footprint of a quarter of passenger cars in Europe and stand in the way of countries meeting the Paris agreement, new analysis reveals.

Despite the scale of shipping emissions from both container and cruise ships in Europe, they are not part of European emissions reduction targets.

In France, Germany, UK, Spain, Sweden and Finland shipping emissions in 2018 were larger than the emissions from all the passenger cars registered in 10 or more of the largest cities in each country, according to the report published on Monday from Transport and Environment, a Brussels-based NGO.

The whole shipping sector emitted about 139m tonnes of CO2 in 2018 – equal to CO2 from a quarter of Europe’s total passenger car fleet or 68m cars, the report, EU Shipping’s Climate Record, said.

Since 2015, shipping companies have had to declare data on their emissions under the EU Monitoring, Reporting and Verification Regulation (MRV). T&E’s report analyses the data and calculates that a container shipping operator has joined coal plants and Ryanair in the EU’s list of top 10 carbon emitters.

The operator – the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) – moves consumer goods, ranging
from electronics and fresh fruit to clothes and toys. It was responsible for about 11m tonnes of CO2 emissions, the report claims.

Faig Abbasov, shipping manager at T&E, who wrote the report, said: “A company that consumers have never heard of has joined the top 10 polluters list in Europe. This industry doesn’t pay a cent for its carbon emissions and the EU has so far done nothing to curb its damage. European trade doesn’t have to be dirty just because EU leaders have neglected to clean up shipping.”

Q&A

Which countries contribute most to the climate crisis?

Show

MSC said: “MSC operates a modern, green fleet and is investing heavily in low-carbon technologies and extensive new-build and retrofit programmes to boost performance and minimise our environmental impact.”

It added: “MSC’s fleet improvement programme has resulted in a 13% reduction in CO2 emissions per transport work in 2015-18 and will help the container shipping industry make progress towards the United Nations International Maritime Organization’s (IMO) 2030 CO2 targets.”

The T&E report said the EU had committed to “economy wide” emissions reductions efforts by signing the Paris agreement. “However shipping is currently the only sector not yet contributing to the EU’s emissions reduction targets and efforts,” it said.

“As such international shipping stands in the way of the EU fulfilling its Paris commitment.”

Shipping emissions have risen since 1990 by about 26m tonnes of CO2, or 19%, the report says.

Shipping is provided with fossil fuel subsidies under EU law of €24bn (£20bn), as well as exemptions from taxes on tickets for passenger ships, VAT and corporate taxes.

There are growing calls in the EU for the regulation of international shipping. The new president of the EU commission, Ursula von der Leyen, made extending the EU emissions trading scheme to maritime transport one of the top political priorities of her tenure.

Abbasov said: “It’s high time national leaders support President Ursula von der Leyen and the European parliament in reining in long-ignored maritime emissions.

“To make shipping do its fair share, Europe must bring shipping into its carbon market and mandate CO2 standards for all ships calling at its ports.”

Since 2015 ships of more than 5,000 gross tonnage have had to report fuel consumption and associated CO2 emissions during voyages between the European Economic Area (EEA) ports.

The T&E analysis published on Monday examines the initial set of emissions reports from the data – giving for the first time a picture of shipping’s carbon footprint in Europe.

The report calls for the EU to impose a CO2 levy on EU shipping and calls for the setting up of a European maritime climate fund to reinvest in the sector to help it reduce its carbon footprint.

It also wants shipping emissions included in the EU’s 2030 reduction objective, as well as the
upcoming EU 2050 decarbonisation target.