

COP26 and concrete action

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COMMENT



The United Nations' 26th Climate Summit, COP26, is currently underway in Glasgow. It is horrifying to think that 26 years have passed since the issue of global warming due to greenhouse gas emissions was first identified as a serious global crisis. Ironical even, that the word Summit, which suggests the idea of a culmination or a climax, has been used for so long to address the same issue.

It does feel a little different this year, though. There seems to be less scepticism, more urgency and even some optimism.

On the Friday before the conference opened, Pope John Francis broadcast a message pleading with world leaders to offer "concrete hope to future generations". He said that global crises in health, the environment, food and the economy were profoundly interconnected and "forecast a perfect storm that could rupture the bonds holding our society together".

"We can confront these crises by retreating into isolationism, protectionism and exploitation. Or we can see in them a real chance for change, a genuine moment of conversion, and not simply in a spiritual sense," said Pope Francis.

A spiritual leader pleading for concrete action from everyone!

On Day 1 of COP26, world leaders called for greater ambition on mitigation, adaptation and finance, urging negotiators to work together to accelerate climate action in this 'crucial decade'. At the heart of their aims is to 'conclude the Rulebook' to support delivery of the Paris Agreement goals to limit global warming to below 2.0 °C and, if at all possible, to 1.5 °C. This asks every nation to develop and commit to a climate action plan called an NDC (Nationally Determined Contribution) that sets out target greenhouse gas-emission limits to match those calculated as necessary by climate scientists. This will only be possible if climate finance is scaled up, including urgently delivering on the US\$100-billion per year goal set in Paris.

To support South Africa's decarbonisation efforts, A Just Energy Transition Partnership was announced as a precedent for how collaboration between an emerging economy and international partners might work. The Transition Partnership between South Africa, France, Germany, UK, US and the EU will initially mobilise \$8.5-billion for the first phase of financing. The initiative is expected to prevent up to 1 to 1.5 Gt of emissions over the next 20 years, support South Africa's move away from coal and

accelerate its transition to a low-emission, climate-resilient economy.

Also now being discussed is adapting to the impacts of climate change as a matter of survival. There is an acknowledgement that climate change is already happening, as is evident by the increasing impacts of storms, floods, droughts, fires and a recent locust plague 'of biblical proportions' in East Africa.

Africa is a most vulnerable continent because of its over-dependence on the local agricultural ecosystem and low levels of adaptive capacity and technologies, and COP26 is highlighting the need for a step-change in finance for adaptation, at least a doubling of current funding.

It had become increasingly clear that the 'radical' side of the change required to attenuate global warming has to come from citizens and private companies. The cover story in this issue of *MechChem Africa* comes from the National Cleaner Production Centre of South Africa (NCPC-SA), which, since its establishment in 2010, has helped industrial companies to save 6.5 TWh of energy by implementing energy-efficiency and resource-optimisation initiatives.

In that time, a new employment sector has been created consisting of 6 000 NCPC-SA-trained professionals in Energy Management Systems and Energy Systems Optimisation. These experts are now available to South African industry with help to better manage the energy use of boilers, pumps, motors, compressors and fans.

New NCPC-SA courses continue to be introduced, including a Bio Systems course, which, according to Tanya Van Zyl, "is of particular importance to us at the NCPC, because it allows us to promote the generation of renewable, sustainable energy in the form of biogas from biological waste, which embraces all the principles of the modern circular economy".

This is concrete action. It is beneficial to the economy, it creates jobs and it is much better for the environment. It makes a zero-carbon future seem achievable and 100% compatible with a happy and healthy lifestyle.

Aside from the global big picture of emitting much less CO₂, methane and other harmful gases from our fossil-burning power stations, every person of every nation needs to use less, buy less, waste a lot less and be more mindful of the nurture our planet requires. We don't have to see this climate-friendly future as austere and impoverished, however. As the Pope suggests, this 'genuine moment of conversion' may lead to a lifestyle filled with far less that is superfluous and far more that is valuable. □

