

# What next for the Global Goal on Adaptation?

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## **AUTHORS**

Patrick Pringle, Dr Adelle Thomas, Ella Strachan

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## Key messages

- The launch of the two-year Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme at COP26 represents a significant step forward in establishing the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) outlined in the Paris Agreement.
- Discussions in Glasgow, and the subsequent decision, reinforced that adaptation action is inherently national and local. For developing countries, it is crucial that the GGA reflects the realities on the ground and will be nationally determined and locally appropriate.
- The GGA should not become a top-down reporting exercise that further burdens countries with limited public resources. Instead, it should become a tool that helps countries identify their strengths and weaknesses so they can better respond to the impacts of climate change.
- There is much work still to be done to bring the GGA concept to life. Striking a balance between the GGA serving its ‘global’ purpose, whilst providing sufficient flexibility for countries to describe their own adaptation objectives and progress will ultimately determine the effectiveness of the GGA.

## Introduction

In the last-minute drama of ‘phasing down’ ambition on coal, the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) was somewhat left in the Glasgow shadows, but progress was made on this important issue. So far, the GGA has largely been chalked down in the ‘success’ column in the public discourse seeking to define COP26, yet there has been little detailed consideration of where we now stand with the GGA, and the challenges that lie ahead.

### GGA and the Paris Agreement

Article 7 of the Paris Agreement established the Global Goal of “*enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change, with a view to contributing to sustainable development and ensuring an adequate response in the context of the temperature goal*” and confirmed that the Global Stocktake (GST) will review the overall progress in achieving this goal.

The GGA was established to drive and enhance global adaptation action. It was seen as a means of increasing the status of, and financial flows to, adaptation; in short if we can shine a spotlight on the progress, needs and shortfalls in building adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability we can start to address them properly.

Grand ideas for the GGA include that it can provide a vision for our collective efforts towards a resilient planet<sup>i</sup> or a ‘North Star’ which can guide collective work on adaptation, alongside increased mitigation ambition<sup>ii</sup> in line with the global temperature goal. Yet going into COP26, little progress had been made in defining and operationalising the GGA despite the explicit expectation within the Paris Agreement that the Global Stocktake (GST) will assess progress in achieving the GGA in 2023.

In this briefing, we consider recent developments which may inform the GGA, explain how the GGA negotiations unfolded at COP26, and what the final text tells us about how the GGA may evolve. Finally, we look ahead to consider 2022.

## Developments in tracking adaptation progress and the GGA

Since the establishment of the Paris Agreement in 2015, the field of adaptation monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has continued to progress. An increasingly nuanced appreciation of the challenges and opportunities presented when developing adaptation metrics<sup>iii</sup> has evolved, as well as the burgeoning literature reflecting on the practical application of methodologies at regional<sup>iv</sup>, national<sup>v</sup> <sup>vi</sup> and sub-national<sup>vii</sup> scales. At the same time, the number of countries with National Adaptation Planning documents and processes has increased, in turn triggering a growing interest in developing national level M&E systems and frameworks.

In Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the focus has so far been upon the development of NAP documents, with less attention paid to establishing M&E systems. This focus is steadily shifting, with initiatives such as the NAP Global Network<sup>viii</sup> supporting the development of nationally appropriate approaches to adaptation M&E. Together, these developments provide a rich theoretical and practical basis for understanding how the GGA might link to national approaches, without addressing this global dimension specifically.

*“The framework of the GGA will strongly influence what type of adaptation action will be prioritised — in other words, what will count in the eyes of the international community.”*

Beauchamp et al., 2021

In the lead-up to Glasgow, a number of valuable contributions were made which more specifically consider how GGA might be taken forward. For example, Beauchamp et al.<sup>ix</sup> stress the significance of the GGA in potentially influencing adaptation priorities and the importance of definitions. They note that even constituent parts of the GGA identified in Article 7 - vulnerability, resilience and adaptive capacity – are often used inconsistently and interchangeably meaning “there is no consensus on a single framework that can universally accommodate all conceptualisations of adaptation”. They suggest that a focus on fair processes and systems which can reflect the context specific nature of adaptation may be more fruitful than searching for metrics or “an unhealthy focus on indicators” seen in some instances.

A joint paper by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)<sup>x</sup>, published on the eve of COP26, emphasises the need for SIDS (and by implication all parties) to be able to define their own targets within a common framework. They share the concern of Beauchamp et al. that the GGA risks increasing reporting burdens for many countries, and in this spirit, the authors take what SIDS are already doing in relation to adaptation planning, target setting and reporting as their starting point to examine how the GGA might best develop.

Arguably the most significant publication on the GGA in 2021 is the Adaptation Committee technical paper on *Approaches to reviewing the overall progress made in achieving the global goal on adaptation*. This paper provides further valuable insights, outlining the myriad of challenges in measuring adaptation at the global level, when adaptation action is inherently national and local. It highlights the issues experienced by adaptation monitoring and evaluation practitioners in recent years and reflects on approaches which could be of use in the context of the GGA. This paper is a first step towards defining a technical way forward for the GGA within the UNFCCC process. While extremely useful, the paper also illustrates the wide range of interpretations and definitions that exist in relation to key concepts, as well as the significant gap between the process implied in the Paris Agreement to develop a GGA and realities on the ground. Whether deliberately or not, the Adaptation Committee emphasises just how much work would be required at COP26 and beyond.

## What happened in Glasgow?

At COP26, a consensus quickly emerged among Parties that the Adaptation Committee's paper was a useful start, that the GGA was a priority for all countries and that a concrete plan was needed for its operationalisation. Discussions then rapidly stalled as Parties became bogged down in other issues concerning the Adaptation Committee and its reports for 2019, 2020 and 2021. When discussions returned to the GGA, many ideas were put on the table, the most detailed of which came from the African Group of Negotiators (AGN) who put forward a detailed plan for a two-year Work Programme, and AOSIS, with a set of principles to guide such a plan.

However, by the end of the first week of COP26, text had been laid upon more text, brackets dominated and there were little signs of a coherent, agreeable way forward. Yet, in the second week, a plan slowly took form. Unsurprisingly, discussions avoided the aforementioned thorny technical issues instead focusing on process. While there were different views on what this process might look like, momentum built around the key features of the AGN concept which was adjusted to reflect concerns. With other unresolved matters such as Loss and Damage weighing heavily on negotiators minds, agreement was found and the ***Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme on the global goal on adaptation*** was born.

## Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme and what it might mean

The Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme reflects the decision to establish and launch a comprehensive two-year work programme on the GGA. The detailed text<sup>xi</sup> sets out the institutional arrangements, scope, objectives, modalities and activities of the work programme. The headline messages regarding the work programme, and the potential implications, are outlined below:

- *The work programme will start immediately* – but quite when and how this 'immediate' start will happen remains unclear. The aim of concluding at COP28 (see below) means that the clock is already ticking.

- *It will be carried out jointly by the SBSTA and SBI with contributions from the current and incoming Presidencies of the Conference of the Parties, the Adaptation Committee, Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and others.* Given the GGA was first proposed by the African Group back in 2013, it is reasonable to think this will be a high priority for the COP27 Presidency.
- *It should be carried out in an inclusive manner with the involvement of Parties (with equitable geographical representation) as well as observers, relevant constituted bodies under the Convention and the Paris Agreement, organizations, experts and practitioners, as appropriate.* How stakeholders will engage with these workshops is still to be determined.
- *Four workshops will be conducted per year* - two virtual intersessional workshops and two workshops in conjunction with the sessions of the subsidiary bodies (June 2022). The workshops will be themed (as selected by the Chairs of the Subsidiary Bodies) with submissions invited in advance.
- *Progress on the Work Programme will be reported to the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA) annually.* The conclusion of the Work Programme will be a draft decision for consideration and adoption by the CMA at COP28 (2023).

## Does the work programme help us to better understand what the GGA will be and how it will work?

The objectives of the Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme set out in the decision text help us to see the direction that work on the GGA may go. Just as importantly, they help us to understand the directions it should not go. Let’s look at these in a little more detail:

### Setting the scene

The first two objectives are largely setting the scene, stating that the Work Programme will (a) enable the *“sustained implementation of the Paris Agreement”* and (b) will *“enhance understanding of the global goal on adaptation, including of the methodologies, indicators, data and metrics, needs and support needed for assessing progress towards it”*. Objective (c) then sets the aforementioned in the context of the Global Stocktake.

### A call for practical application and local relevance

We now begin to get a sense of what is expected from the GGA through objective (d) to *“enhance national planning and implementation of adaptation actions”* linked to National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and adaptation communications and (e) *“Enable Parties to better communicate their adaptation priorities, implementation and support needs, plans and actions”*.

The above objectives emerged from a desire from developing countries for practical outputs from the GGA which not only link to existing UNFCCC and national processes, but which can be used to *“strengthen implementation of adaptation actions in vulnerable developing countries”* (Objective (g)). This sends a clear message that for developing countries the GGA should not be about reporting upwards, it must generate useful and useable information for

national and sub-national levels. It is also consistent with Article 14, para. 3 of the Paris Agreement<sup>xii</sup> which emphasises that the outcomes of the Global Stocktake (GST) should inform Parties in *“updating and enhancing, in a nationally determined manner, their actions and support.”* As such, the GGA must be a valuable source of knowledge and information for countries, not simply an exercise in aggregation and reporting.

This theme of country relevance continues in objective (f) to *“facilitate the establishment of robust, nationally appropriate systems for monitoring and evaluating adaptation actions”*. Perhaps not perfectly worded, it does at least provide a conceptual connection between national level M&E systems and the GGA, and echoes later calls for the avoidance of burdensome approaches.

The risk of the GGA worsening capacity issues in already constrained countries is also addressed in objective h) which calls for an avoidance of duplication and greater complementarity between the GGA and communication and reporting instruments established under the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC.

Moving on from the specific objectives, a number of paragraphs within the CMA decision can help us to understand the key traits of the GGA and the Work Programme to operationalise it, a number of which relate to the “principles’ put forward by AOSIS at COP26.

### Nationally led, and no additional burden

Paragraph 8 states *“that implementation of the work programme should reflect the country-driven nature of adaptation and avoid creating any additional burden for developing country Parties”*.

The reference to burdens on developing countries, both in terms of data collection and reporting, reflects concerns of Parties and also mirrors and reinforces the “recurring themes and overarching considerations” section of the Adaptation Committee Technical Paper. This paragraph also indicates that Parties expect the work programme, and its outcomes, to be nationally determined and locally appropriate and arguably steers the GGA away from global indices and top-down, globally imposed indicators.

There will be a need for a consistent and spatially coherent framework for the GGA to serve its ‘global’ purpose, whilst providing sufficient flexibility for countries to describe their own adaptation objectives and progress in achieving them. Striking this balance may well determine how effective the GGA is in achieving its objectives.

### Employing mixed methods to ensure a nuanced and holistic assessment of the adaptation progress

The decision text recognises that *“combining various approaches to reviewing overall progress made in achieving the global goal on adaptation, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, can generate a more holistic picture of adaptation progress and help to balance the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches”*.

This text also draws upon the Adaptation Committee Technical Paper which found the use of mixed methods to be a recurring theme. It can be read as a tacit acknowledgement that the context-specificity of adaptation means that the GGA cannot be distilled into a small number of globally applicable, quantifiable goals and still retain relevance and utility. This was certainly a concern expressed by developing countries and SIDS in Glasgow.

### Builds on the work of the Adaptation Committee

Paragraph 9 provides further endorsement of the work of the Adaptation Committee as it *“Decides that activities carried out under the work programme should build on the work of the Adaptation Committee related to the global goal on adaptation”*. There are still decisions to be made and issues to untangle in order to operationalise the GGA but it is clear that the Technical Paper is considered as a sound starting point in, *“working towards progressively more comprehensive and rigorous assessments over time<sup>xiii</sup>”*.

### Inclusive, participatory and transparent

Adaptive capacity, resilience and vulnerability can look very different depending on your perspective. An inherent danger in attempting to provide a global overview of progress is that these perspectives can be lost. This can lead to a distorted, simplified view of adaptation progress and potentially channel adaptation finance to issues which are easily quantified or immediately apparent, at the expense of more complex or nuanced issues.

It is therefore reassuring to see the CMA decision recalling that *“adaptation action should follow a country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent approach, taking into consideration vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems, and should be based on and guided by the best available science and, as appropriate, traditional knowledge, knowledge of indigenous peoples and local knowledge systems with a view to integrating adaptation into relevant socioeconomic and environmental policies and actions”*.

While somewhat of a catch-all, this text can be seen as another beacon to direct the Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme.

### Conclusions

With the Global Stocktake now looming large on the horizon, it was essential to see progress being made in framing the GGA and establishing a Work Programme to take it forward. In Glasgow, this progress was set within a broader theme of re-balancing adaptation and mitigation to ensure developing countries are better positioned to implement practical responses to climate change. Alongside the GGA, there was a commitment to double the collective share of adaptation finance within the \$100 billion annual target for 2021-2025.

This readjustment is both urgent and welcome; the events of 2021 have continued to reinforce that extreme climate change events are worsening even at current warming levels, and we know we have significant further warming still to come.



It is promising to see a clear Work Programme established for the GGA as well as an emergent set of perspectives or principles which begin to set a framework within which the GGA can evolve. Most notably, there is a recognition of the context-specific nature of adaptation, the need for country-driven approaches and the importance of pragmatism and flexibility.

Yet there is still much work to do, and much to be decided. Discussions at COP26 and the resultant decision text appear to steer the GGA away from the rocks of top-down indices and globally imposed indicators, however striking the balance between methodological consistency and robustness and a flexible, bottom-up approach will be difficult. Finding consensus on the common elements which can lead to an overarching conceptual framework will be both practically and politically challenging. The potential burdens created by the GGA are acknowledged, however this will still be a major undertaking, particularly for SIDS and LDCs where capacities are already constrained. The COP decision on increasing finance for adaptation to \$40bn per year offers some hope for potential increased resources for this, but also highlights the current inadequacy of funding to plan, implement and, importantly, to evaluate adaptation.

The role of the GGA in directing future adaptation finance remains fuzzy; for some parties this was implicit in its inception, for others less so. GGA methodologies could be seen as providing a more evidence-based approach to addressing adaptation needs, but may also create new winners and losers in the race to access finance. It is also unclear the extent to which the GST will be able to assess the GGA in 2023 and whether methodologies need to be developed with a sense of realism for what can be used in the next GST, alongside what is desirable and possible in the medium term. The Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work programme is a welcome outcome of long nights of negotiations in Glasgow, but there is even more hard work still to come.

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