

Inside the Blue Zone, Part Two

WSP USA's Tom Lewis explains why he sees accelerated action coming out of the United Nation's COP26 climate change conference, which concluded on Nov. 12.

NEWS RELEASE BY WSP

Northampton, MA | November 24, 2021 10:06 AM Eastern Standard Time



The much-anticipated UN 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) global climate held Oct. 31-Nov. 12 in Glasgow, Scotland, came to an end with mixed reviews about the progress made.

I agree that we need work done more quickly on climate and with a greater commitment to inclusion of the most vulnerable and least heard; yet I was also highly encouraged by what I witnessed first-hand inside the event's Blue Zone. Overall, it was a net positive for me.

In fact, in my 35-year career, I have not seen such good alignment across all sectors (government, non-governmental organizations and private/business) on where we need to go ultimately - with the majority of disagreement being how fast we can and will get there.

For WSP, the agenda is clear: Sustainable, resilient infrastructure solutions are critical to any blueprint for a healthier planet.

One of the key topics I focused on at COP26 is financing for sustainable infrastructure and development. A resilient and sustainable future requires funding and financing expertise from both the public and private sectors that enable sound and equitable

strategy decisions and the successful execution of projects and associated community engagement.

Finding 'Shovel Ready' Projects

The conversations I had throughout the conference affirmed the need for this to be a better coordinated and more efficient process to de-risk sustainable infrastructure investments by making them more resilient.

Currently, there is a risk that there will be more money lined up than there will be sustainable "shovel ready" projects, which could lead some of the money to go elsewhere to deliver returns to investors in an acceptable time period.

WSP is among the organizations that can help address this issue through the firm's risk-based vulnerability analysis and frameworks, which allow for organizational mainstreaming of resilience in conjunction with effective sustainability and environmental, social and governance programs.

Radical collaboration, too—across WSP, with other partner consultancies, and through associations like **ICSI, Resilience First, CCRI, GARI, and ISI**—will be critical to share best practices and act as a force-multiplier to increase the pipeline of projects available for funding.

To some this may sound counter-intuitive – isn't funding generally welcome? Yes, but not under all circumstances, because having big dollars available, but without enough projects ready to go can create a near-term risk that may result in private funding diverted in other directions, squandering this opportune moment.

Equity and Biodiversity

I was most impressed by the prominence of conversations around resilience and climate adaptation – including the incorporation of equity, biodiversity and nature-based solutions, which are increasingly mainstream concepts within the infrastructure planning and design community.

The urgent need for this really hit home during the COP26 screening of a film called *that* that followed a group of climate migrants, largely through the eyes of women, as they fled with their families from sea level rise, warming waters with less fish and devastating disasters.

Their ability to feed, house and protect themselves and their families as the elder males sought jobs elsewhere was tenuous at best, and it highlighted that the wealthiest countries have an obligation to help developing countries. The global north's industrial

past has created the bulk of the climate problem and it urgently needs to address the losses, damage and the escalating vulnerabilities of parts of the world unequipped to cope with rising seas, deadly temperatures, and resulting drought, disease, food shortages and extreme weather events.

Race to Resilience

The Resilience Hub and home of the recently launched Race to Resilience that was co-sponsored by WSP, was a beehive of activity where I spent a lot of my time in the Blue Zone at COP26. The Race to Resilience aims to “catalyze a step-change in global ambition for climate resilience, putting people and nature first in pursuit of a resilient world where we don’t just survive climate shocks and stresses but thrive in spite of them.”

In parallel with its older sibling, the Race to Zero, the Race to Resilience needs engagement from the private sector in general, and the engineering community in particular.

To this end, during one of my speaking engagements in the Resilience Hub I highlighted the **Resilience First Race to Resilience Partner Initiative** and **ICSI’s Race to Resilience Partner Initiative**, which are focused on doing precisely this.

I also noted the level of discussion on biodiversity and specifically nature-based solutions. WSP had great additions to these topics. My colleague Jennifer Brunton hosted a discussion on **nature-based solutions** with the International Chamber of Commerce as a side event to COP26. It was encouraging to listen in on these and other conversations, with a true spirit of innovation in the air, particularly around carbon capture, electrification, and the green energy transition.

My top-line takeaway from COP26 is that we have the funding, the knowledge and the will all coming together at the same time for a very positive inflection point on climate action. What’s needed now is accelerated practical action and teamwork.

And that’s where WSP shines.

Tom Lewis is the Climate, Resilience & Sustainability Executive Lead at WSP USA.

[Click here to read "Inside the Blue Zone, Part One"](#)

[To subscribe to Insights, contact the editorial staff at insights@wsp.com.]

View additional multimedia and more ESG storytelling from WSP on 3blmedia.com

Tags

ENVIRONMENT

GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE