



COP 28: Weighed and found wanting

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Abstract: Hopes were high that COP 28 might be a game-changer against the climate crisis. A closer look at the outcomes of the climate summit, however, say otherwise.

The [UAE Consensus](#) was adopted at the conclusion of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 28) last December 2023 in Dubai. COP 28 was particularly important since it came at the heels of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The report detailed the destructive impacts of climate change and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions around the world and what we can do to mitigate and adapt to them before it is too late. It has already been [previously established](#) that climate change has a direct impact on the enjoyment of human rights. There were hopes that COP 28 might lead to direct actions that could help the world avert the worst impacts of the climate crisis. It can be argued that the summit has quite a few better-than-expected outcomes. Despite the supposed minor wins, though, the UAE Consensus does not go far enough to address the climate crisis and protect human rights.

The beginning of the end of fossil fuel? Not really

The first major headline COP 28 agreement —that of the Global Stocktake— called for '[transitioning away from fossil fuels](#)'. For the first time in almost 30 years

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of climate negotiations, fossil fuels have been explicitly identified as having a direct bearing on climate change. UN Climate Change secretary Simon Stiell [says](#) the agreement is the 'beginning of the end' of the fossil fuel era. But is it? Lest we forget, the conference was held in the United Arab Emirates, a petrostate which [produces](#) 3.2 million barrels of oil per day, with plans to [ramp up](#) production to 5 million barrels per day. The president of COP 28, Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber, is also chair of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, which has aggressive expansion plans that puts it on course to be the [second-largest oil company in the world](#) by 2050. Al-Jaber has previously [stated](#) that 'there is no science...that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what's going to achieve 1.5C'. Unsurprisingly, a record [2456 fossil fuel lobbyists](#) were allowed to attend COP 28. This is nearly four times more fossil fuel lobbyists than attended COP 27 in Shiek al-Sharm and outnumbering almost every country delegation except the UAE's and Brazil's. It is then no wonder that the UAE Consensus for a weak 'transitioning away from fossil fuels' rather than strongly pushing for fully phasing out fossil fuels, supposedly a no-brainer given it has [long been established](#) that fossil fuel combustion is the top source of GHG emissions. It is almost funny that the text also calls for the transition to be in 'keeping with the science', considering that appeals from countless scientists regarding the dangers of continued use of fossil fuels have been repeatedly ignored by government and business leaders through the years. The UAE Consensus establishes neither guidelines nor deadlines regarding the transition away from fossil fuels, nor does it provide penalties for those who might break the consensus. The text also gives the leeway to transition away from fossil fuels under each country's 'different national circumstances, pathways, and approaches', which leaves the largest fossil fuel users and GHG emitters so much room for interpretation and manoeuvre that it renders the call for transitioning away from fossil fuels almost toothless. It won't be the 'beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era'; it will be business as usual for big emitters.

There is no off-setting loss and damage with COP 28

The other major headline agreement of COP 28 was the operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund (LDF) established in Sharm el-Shiekh the year before. The historic fund would be used to assist developing countries in coping with the damages wrought by extreme weather events and slow onset events exacerbated by the climate crisis. Delegates agreed to the new fund rules early into the climate summit, with al-Jaber saying that the decision was a 'positive signal of momentum to the world and to our work here in Dubai'. Pledges to the fund amounted to just over USD 700 million by the end of the summit. Contribution to the LDF, however, is on a voluntary basis, a loophole that allows countries historically responsible for the most greenhouse gas emissions to shirk from their duties grounded on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). The pledges also fall quite short of what is needed by affected countries, estimated by some to be as much as USD 400 billion annually. The 2022 flooding in Pakistan, as an example, resulted in USD 30 billion in losses while USD 16 billion was needed for reconstruction efforts. Libya's reconstruction and recovery needs after the catastrophic September 2023 flooding amounted to USD 1.8 billion, more than twice the pledges made in Dubai. Global fossil fuel subsidies, on the other hand, amounted to USD 7 trillion in 2022, and this amount is expected to rise to USD 8.2 trillion by 2030. Over USD 1 trillion was invested in

fossil fuels, with 75 percent spent on oil and gas in 2023. UN secretary general Antonio Guterres called continued investment in fossil fuels 'delusional'. It doesn't seem to be stopping countries and companies from doing so, however. In addition, the fund is being placed for the next four years under the aegis of the World Bank, an institution which supplied USD 3.7 billion in financing to fossil fuels in 2022. The bank has also been criticised for advocating for neoliberal, market-based policies that promote inequality instead of stymying it. A worse institution to house the fund could not have been found. A good thing, then, is that developing countries were able to establish mechanisms that would remove the fund from under the World Bank should the latter prove to be not up to the task.

Underfinanced

Climate financing, which Stiehl [called](#) the 'great enabler of climate action', has long been a contentious issue in climate negotiations. Pledges made during the summit meant the Green Climate Fund now had a total of USD 12.5 billion in pledges. A couple of other existing climate funds received several hundred million dollars more.

The amount is a pittance compared to what is needed. Since 2009, the world has struggled to mobilise the yearly USD 100 billion promised to developing countries to help them take climate action, whether through emissions reductions or adaptation measures. Developed countries managed to [cough up](#) USD 89.6 billion in 2021, yet only 9 percent of that went to low income countries who need it most. It is estimated that developing countries [will need](#) USD 215 to 387 billion yearly this decade to spend on adaptation alone, which is 10 to 18 times higher than the USD 21 billion available for adaptation financing in 2021. In contrast, global military spending rose for the eighth consecutive year in 2022, [reaching](#) an all-time high of USD 2.24 trillion.

COP 28 bric-a-brac

Other minor issues discussed in COP 28 were just as ornamental as the major ones. The UAW Consensus essentially sanctioned the use of 'transitional fuels' while transitioning from fossil fuel use to clean energy. Transitional fuel is the [code word](#) for natural gas, which is of course still a fossil fuel and which will still emit greenhouse gases when used. There also seemed to be a determined push to promote techno fixes —such as carbon capture and storage technologies as a major solution to the climate crisis, as if saying that the world can meet its climate goals despite the continued use of fossil fuels if we use these techno-fixes. The failure of the negotiations to establish a carbon market was [hailed](#) by civil society groups as a victory, as it would prevent the 'flood of worthless, damaging carbon credits'. Previous carbon offset projects have [resulted](#) in human rights violations, such as land grabs, community displacement, and violence against indigenous and rural populations. COP 28 is, in the final instance, a failure. It finally recognised the need to transition away from fossil fuels but did not lay down strong guidelines on how to do this. Pledges for additional climate financing were certainly not enough to meet the growing need for loss and damage as well as adaptation and transition. Proposed technological and market solutions do not really address the problem. It may have delivered, but only for the fossil fuel lobby and for rich nations.