

Navigating the Climate Crossroads: Insights from COP28

Fatima Binte Zahid¹



Source: COP28

Last year, the United Nations Climate Change Conference took place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, from 30th November to 12th December 2023. The conference hosted several meetings, including the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28), the 5th session of the Paris Agreement's decision-making body (CMA 5) and the 18th session of the Kyoto Protocol's decision-making body (CMP 18). There were press conferences, side events, technical meetings,

¹ Fatima Binte Zahid is a Research Assistant at the Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). Previously, she was a Teaching Assistant at the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). She completed her MSS and BSS (honors) from the Department of International Relations under the Faculty of Security and Strategic Studies at BUP.

high-level sessions for world leaders, closed-door talks among various delegations, and pavilion and side activities. The conference brought together around 84,000 people from around the world.²

COP conferences are the only annual multilateral decision-making forum on climate change where the world comes together to discuss ways to address the climate crisis. The focus of COP28 was implementing the Paris Climate Change Agreement and ramping up the actions. It aimed to provide an opportunity to reach the Paris Agreement goals by finding global solutions to reduce global temperature rise and accelerate green transition.³

COP28 featured the first Global Stocktake, in which governments evaluated the degree of progress made toward the objectives outlined in the Paris Agreement and determined a plan of action.⁴ Nearly all nations committed to "transition away from fossil fuels," which are the primary cause of climate change. In the 28 years of COP, this commitment represents the first of its kind.⁵

2023 was the hottest year on record, and 2024 is projected to beat that. Countries worldwide are experiencing catastrophic natural disasters brought on by shifting weather patterns and rising temperatures. These facts highlight the necessity for extensive actions to safeguard the environment. This requirement is even more critical for nations disproportionately affected by climate change. According to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Greenhouse Gas emissions need to be reduced to 43% by 2030 in order to limit the rise of temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius and avoid the worst disastrous outcomes of climate change.

Considering the urgency of climate action, this commentary dives into the COP28 Conference to highlight the key developments from the conference and discuss the challenges and controversies the conference faced.

² "COP28: Key takeaways from this year's climate change conference", Afghanaid, <https://www.afghanaid.org.uk/news/cop28-key-takeaways-from-this-years-climate-change-conference>.

³ "About COP 28", United Nations Climate Change, <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/conferences/un-climate-change-conference-united-arab-emirates-nov/dec-2023/about-cop-28>.

⁴ "UN Climate Change Conferences", United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/un-climate-conferences>.

⁵ "COP28: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Dubai", Carbon Brief, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop28-key-outcomes-agreed-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-dubai>.



Source: UN

“We are living through climate collapse in real-time – and the impact is devastating.”

– UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 30 November 2023

Key Developments at COP28

Despite the scepticism towards the COP28 conference due to its being held in an oil-producing country and the general reluctance of many countries towards green transition, some mentionable initiatives were taken. Some of the key accomplishments of the conference include:

The Loss and Damage Fund: The landmark agreement of the COP28 conference was the Loss and Damage fund. Damages brought on by climate-related disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and droughts, will be covered by this fund, which is a big step towards climate justice. Member countries have pledged \$700 million in funding to assist developing countries to recover from the effects of climate change.⁶ Developed countries are required to contribute to the fund in an amount proportionate to their involvement in causing climate change.

⁶ “COP28 – Results, Key Findings and Summary”, DFGE, <https://dfge.de/cop28-results-key-findings-and-summary>.

Global Stocktake: The endorsement of the first-ever “Global Stocktake” under the Paris Agreement was at the center of the COP28 deliberations. The purpose of the five-year stocktake is to assess the status of the Paris Agreement and provide guidance for the upcoming round of nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The COP28 invited all nations to contribute to a set of objectives, among which was "accelerating action in this critical decade and transitioning away from fossil fuels."⁷ This is the first time a COP decision has specifically denounced all fossil fuels after almost 30 years.

‘Transition Away’ from Fossil Fuels and Growth in Renewable Energy Capacity: The adoption of a fossil fuel agreement at COP28 was a historic outcome. It binds the parties to a just, orderly, and equitable transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems in order to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The accord also mandates the acceleration of technologies like carbon capture and storage and the tripling of renewable energy capacity worldwide by 2030. The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty has been proposed to reduce the use of fossil fuels like coal, gas, and oil while founding a framework for a greater reliance on renewable energy sources.

Food and Agriculture Declaration: The "Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems" emphasizes the critical junction between climate change and global food systems. It has been endorsed by more than 130 international leaders. In addition to advancing the UN Sustainable Development Goals, this declaration establishes a global commitment to adopting more sustainable farming practices, reducing carbon emissions within the food system, and improving food security. The declaration also seeks to increase calls for legislation that would support resilient and sustainable agricultural livelihoods and expand access to nutritious food and clean water.

Climate, Relief, Recovery, and Peace Declaration: COP28 Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery, and Peace is a non-binding call to action for governments, financial institutions, international organizations, and other relevant parties to work together to address climate resilience in highly vulnerable nations and people, particularly those impacted by conflict and critical humanitarian needs. The declaration acknowledges the interconnected problems of violence, instability, climate change, and humanitarian crises, which disproportionately affect women,

⁷ “COP28: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Dubai”, Carbon Brief.

children, indigenous people, and persons with disabilities. The declaration urges funding for climate adaptation programs that are sensitive to conflict, informed by vulnerable groups, and emphasize the value of adaptability in the implementation of solutions.

Challenges and Controversies

Even with some major developments, COP28 was unable to bring about the swift action on climate change that is necessary. The major challenges and controversies of the conference were:

Appointment of COP28 Presidency: The appointment of Dr Sultan Al Jaber, Head of the UAE's state-owned oil company, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), as the President of COP28, triggered an immediate outrage. It was deemed "completely ridiculous" by Greta Thunberg, and former US Vice President Al Gore claimed that COP had been taken over by fossil fuel interests. More than a hundred US congressmen and European Parliament members demanded Al Jaber's ouster.⁸ Before the commencement of the conference, UAE was also alleged to have secretly used the conference to secure oil and gas deals.

Less demand for Action: The Global stocktake's language makes little demands for action. The majority of its 196 paragraphs and 21 pages use non-operative verbs like "recalls," "notes," and "welcomes," which don't ask for any form of response from other nations. There are simply 8 "decides" and 8 "calls on," the latter being the least strong word among those used to ask nations to act upon a decision made by the COP.

Insufficient Loss and Damage Fund: The loss and damage fund falls short of what the climate-vulnerable communities actually need in order to rebuild their life after the disasters. The estimated annual cost of the damage ranges from \$100 billion to \$580 billion whereas the countries have only pledged \$700 million.⁹

No 'Phase-Out': Several nations left the negotiations unhappy since there was no clear directive to "phase out" fossil fuels by the end of this decade, and there were loopholes in the agreement that might allow the extraction and use of coal, oil, and gas indefinitely. For instance, there were plans to "phasing down" the "unabated" usage of coal. Concerns arise from the fact that "unabated"

⁸ "COP28: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Dubai", Carbon Brief.

⁹ "COP28 – Results, Key Findings and Summary", DFGE.

coal use permits unrestricted amounts of coal burning as long as the carbon dioxide it produces is more regularly extracted from the atmosphere and stored underground, a measure that climate experts claim is insufficient to lessen the impact of emissions. The lack of a timeline to transition away from fossil fuel keeps the global risk of crossing the 1.5-degree Celsius warming threshold.

Absence of Financial Pledges: The absence of financial pledges for moving away from fossil fuels and preparing for the effects of climate change disappointed the developing countries. Aside from the loss-and-damage fund, none of the primary concerns on the COP28 agenda were solely related to climate finance.

Lack of urgency from major emitters: The lack of urgency and ambition displayed by some of the big emitters, including India, China and Russia, presented a difficulty. Under the Paris Agreement, countries are required to cut their emissions voluntarily. These countries did not submit any amended or new nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The expected emissions and the amount needed to keep the rise in global temperature below 1.5°C are too far apart to be closed by the current NDCs.

Frustration from activists: Many civil society organizations, indigenous people, young activists, and scientists showed their displeasure and frustration by staging rallies and demonstrations during the summit, calling on the leaders to take more action and provide justice. They also criticized the fossil fuel industry's power and the underrepresentation of the most disadvantaged and impacted populations.



Source: International Institute for Sustainable Development

Conclusion

In the midst of controversy surrounding Sultan al-Jaber's appointment as president due to his status as an oil mogul in the UAE and his purported doubts about climate science, states participating in the COP28 were under pressure to ratify a new climate agreement. In the first assessment of their efforts to lower emissions to slow down global warming, countries were also found to be lagging behind.

While some experts celebrate the start of the end of the fossil fuel age at COP28, others complain about the absence of specific goals and deadlines. Small efforts are insufficient in the face of the immediacy of the situation.

We need to address the climate crisis immediately. More has to be done to mitigate the effects of climate change. Short-term effects of carbon reductions can be significant in the energy sector. Ambitious mitigation pledges must coexist with increased financial initiatives.