

# After COP27: Whither climate leadership?

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## **The twenty-seventh Conference of the Parties (COP27) – tasked, like every annual UNFCCC conference, to accelerate climate ambition and action – duly laboured under the current global crises. What and where next?**

2022 has been a year of multi-dimensional crises as the Russian invasion of Ukraine fostered an energy crisis, deepened the food crisis and, intensified the water crisis and the ‘post-Covid’ debt crisis. COP27 certainly felt the impact of these crises. Expectations of the conference were low. Indeed there was understandable worry from the environmental community that the oil and gas sector, heavily represented at Sharm El-Sheikh, would turn the climate conference into a ‘world gas trade fair’ (pushing gas as the solution to the energy crisis). The dilemmas posed, for the developed countries, between short-term energy security and longer-term climate action and, for the developing countries, between development and climate action were not addressed head-on.

### **Key outcomes of COP27**

The key outcomes of COP27 are telling in this context. Under the leadership of the small island states, developing countries pushed for and gained at the last a ‘Loss and Damage’ facility that has eluded them throughout UNFCCC history. There are also important pointers in the decision text (the Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan) to reform of international financial institutions, including that of debt suspension for climate-afflicted countries.

Conversely, there was little if no progress on mitigation targets (in order to keep the average global temperature to 1.5C by 2100), nothing on the promised doubling of climate adaptation finance, little on agriculture and food security, and, for many, worrying references to ‘low emission energy’ in the just energy transition (confirmation that fossil gas was considered by a number of parties, under the guidance of the Egyptian COP presidency, as a climate-friendly fuel). The few successes and many failures of COP27 revealed the workings of two kinds of leadership at COP, made starkly evident by the crises and dilemmas in which the conference was set: One, leadership on the reduction of GHG emissions, assumed by developed countries, particularly the US, the EU and the UK; the other, leadership on loss and damage, adaptation and development (sustainable or not), assumed by developing countries, particularly the Egyptian presidency, the small-island states, Pakistan and China. At COP27 these two leaderships went in very different, if not opposed directions.

As a result, neither were able to link together mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage and forge the global climate leadership necessary to solve, through the catalyst of climate action, the multidimensional crises in the first place. For this reason, both events in 2022 and the outcomes of COP27 reveal the importance of forging a clear framework of action under which the political leaderships of the developed and developing countries can come together.

At the start of the UNFCCC process (1992), under the Framework Convention on climate change, climate science and climate realities were only emerging in international importance. The focus was accordingly on the reduction of GHG emissions alone, but in the context of a specific relationship between developed and developing countries: given their (historically accumulated) resources, developed countries would 'lead' on mitigation (Article 4, #2a) in the full awareness that developing countries would continue to emit to sustain economic growth and reduce poverty (the right to development). The UN framework for international cooperation on climate change was clear: 'in accordance with the [parties'] common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities and their social and economic conditions' (Preamble).

After the failure to agree a post-Kyoto protocol in 2009 (COP15, Copenhagen) there are two shifts of import for the two diverging tracks of leadership rehearsed above, shifts that are in essence, consolidated by the Paris Agreement in 2015. First, given the increasing urgency of climate change, all countries are requested annually to ratchet up their GHG emission reductions (Nationally Determined Contributions). Second, the UNFCCC process aligns with a global average peaking of emissions (by 2025) that puts increasing pressure on all countries, not just developed countries. Rather than a unified multilateral leadership linking mitigation with development emerging in this context, each set of countries prioritize (at varied intensity) one strategy against the other. Mistrust and power differentials skew successful climate diplomacy. COP 27 starkly reveals, therefore, in the context of the present multidimensional crisis, the need to forge one climate leadership which links climate with development, mitigation with adaptation and loss and damage, and vice versa. Without this leadership, UNFCCC targets will not be achieved.

### **What must be done going forward to COP28 to facilitate this leadership?**

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The UNFCCC secretariat will certainly review the presidency of COP27 that, wilfully or not, increased distrust among parties. There have already been important calls from international climate leaders also to bring the COP process back to its 'original purpose' or to 're-purpose it' so that it can address the 'mitigation gap' in time and at scale. Any re-purposing of COP28+ cannot happen, however, without a leadership that explicitly links the two sides of the conundrum together. During this next year, there must accordingly be focused political attention on the following:

- Building trust among developed and developing countries through concrete acts of regional and international climate finance initiatives (clarity around the new loss and damage fund, debt suspension, IMF and WB funding to the most vulnerable, an increasing number of regional Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs), etc.);

- Building momentum to comprehensive climate leadership through political conferences (President Macron's proposed conference on financing mechanisms in June 2023 is one example);
- Extensive international support for bilateral relations between the US and China on climate action;
- Support for the COP28 presidency of the UAE – a petrol state – to address, linked with adaptation and loss and damage, the phasing down of all fossil fuels.

A multi-dimensional crisis or a complex problem requires solutions that simultaneously tick several boxes. The basic price of renewable energy now allows for the reality of these solutions, but the latter requires, at the multilateral level, one climate leadership that forges the link between climate and development in mutually reinforcing collaborative terms. Is this leadership politically possible?

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