

COP28: The fossil fuel COP and political leadership on climate

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Richard Beardsworth, Professor of International Relations and Head of School from POLIS, University of Leeds, reflects on COP28, focusing on the fossil fuel COP and political leadership on climate

The 2023 Conference of the Parties (COP28) in Dubai has been designated by participants (governments as well as the UN secretariat and civil society actors) as the 'fossil fuel COP'. What are the stakes in this designation and what political leadership is required to address them?

This article rehearses these stakes as well as the political response necessary. Although it will be evident by the time this article is published to what extent COP28 has been a successful 'fossil fuel COP', the political leadership so desperately needed for the average global temperature increase of 1.5°C to retain meaning will remain an absolute priority for climate leaders throughout 2024.

Political leadership on climate: COP28/The Paris Agreement

COP28 turns around the Global Stocktake (GST), the first of which since the Paris Agreement in 2015 concludes in Dubai. To recap:

The Paris Agreement set the maximum rise of global warming to 2°C with a lower achievable limit of 1.5°C (1.5°C has been accepted as the target since COP25).

To achieve this target, developed and developing countries must submit Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that align with the UNFCCC target of 1.5°C. The developed countries' take the lead' given their historical responsibility for climate change and their respective capabilities.

Aligned with this temperature target, although not covering all greenhouse gases (GHGs), is the 'global carbon budget'. The carbon budget delimits the total additional quantity of CO₂ that can be released into the atmosphere for a named probability of not exceeding a given temperature threshold: the main scenarios with which the UNFCCC works is a 50% probability that the planet remains under 1.5°C.

Now, the summary report of the GST published last September stated that the world is way off target (between 2.5 to 2.9°C), and the remaining carbon budget aligned to 1.5°C is now confirmed at only six to seven years.

The GST summary report, together with the International Energy Agency's NetZero Roadmap: A Global Pathway to Keep the 1.5°C Goal in Reach, summarised what political action needed to be taken at COP28 for there to be policy alignment with the climate science:

- With fossil fuels contributing 75% to GHG emissions, fossil fuel production and use must be phased out.
- The layout of renewables should be accelerated simultaneously by a factor of three.
- Energy efficiency should be improved simultaneously by a factor of two.

The energy transition

These three priorities concern the transition from carbon to clean energy economies – ‘the energy transition’. With weighted equity considerations between both developed and developing countries and the ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ of the energy system transformation, they are simultaneously concerned with the transition from carbon to clean energy societies – ‘the just energy transition’. In sum, political leadership at COP28 must address 1) the urgency of the climate crisis by scheduling the phase-out of fossil fuels and 2) the balance between this urgency and equity. Where do things stand?

The UAE COP President sowed huge distrust among stakeholders with off-the-cuff comments that there was no direct correlation between the temperature threshold of 1.5°C and climate science.

There has also been enormous anger that this year fields the largest lobby ever of the fossil fuel industry. The official climate leadership of COP has, in other words, proven ridden by conflicts of interest that the UNFCCC must address.

COP28 successes

That said, there are important COP28 successes that address the contribution of fossil fuels to the climate crisis:

1. Following the momentum gathered by Sunnylands statement on Chinese/U.S. cooperation in November, 155 countries have now signed up to the Global Methane Pledge aiming to reduce methane emissions (43% of which comes from fossil fuels) by 30% by 2030 and 45% by 2035. If implemented, global average temperature will reduce by 0.2C.

2. The phase-out of coal is now squarely on the ministerial negotiating table. As a fossil fuel, coal contributes 45% to energy-related GHG emissions. Among nine new countries, the U.S. and UAE have joined the [Power Past Coal Alliance](#) coalition so that, as with the global methane pledge, the political leadership of coal phase-out is building inextricable momentum. Within this momentum, climate finance for the transition from coal to renewables is being targeted so that the phasing-out dates between 2030 and 2040 can be practical, affordable and equitable.

These successes are, however, not led politically in either a consistent or comprehensive manner. U.S. and UK leaders have, for example, made much of their political responsibility in leading, respectively, on methane and coal. In doing so, neither has addressed publicly, however, the phasing out of oil and gas. Both continue their production when the science and policy response to it require immediate scheduling of their phase-out.

Has COP28 initiated a comprehensive fossil-fuel phase-out?

Political leadership on climate remains, in this sense, [ambivalent](#). Countries pick and choose what they wish to lead on, all the while touting their political integrity (a new version of 'greenwashing'). The basic maths requires that the policy pathway to end coal is invented anew with oil and gas.

Here, the final cover decision of COP28 is crucial. If the science and maths are included in the final text, it will be considered that COP28 has initiated a comprehensive fossil-fuel phase-out. The distinction between the phase-out of 'unabated' or all fossil fuels will then become the next political battle for climate leadership. A phase-out of all fossil fuels pre-empts any attempt to continue the normal production and use of oil and gas through abatement strategies. However, any reference to 'phase-out' in the cover decision is highly likely to refer to 'unabated' fossil fuels alone.

The 'fossil fuel COP' is rehearsing the stakes of alignment with 1.5C: comprehensive phase-out. For that, consistent political leadership is necessary, one that focuses on 1) the phasing-out of all fossil fuels (urgency) and 2) a global scheduling of this phase-out with different pathways among all countries towards the 'endgame' of each fossil fuel (equity). COP28 will have shown us how far political leadership is near to, or far from, these 1.5°C-aligned goals.

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