

COP28 Outcomes: the beginning of the end for fossil fuels or a COP-out?

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COP climate summits almost inevitably leave some observers and participants disappointed. COP28, held in Dubai in early December, was no exception. Many commentators have expressed disappointment, especially on the grounds that the final text, approved by all [197 participating countries](#) – is ‘[devoid of actionable commitments](#)’. The most critical participants were the [small island states](#) who issued a statement describing the agreement as ‘full of loopholes’ and ‘a step backwards’.

Much of the attention at COP28 focused on one particular paragraph in the final text. This was paragraph 28 [d] where all participants agreed to ‘recognise the need ... to [transition away from fossil fuels](#) in energy systems, in a just orderly and equitable manner, accelerating action in this critical decade, so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science’.

But this much debated point was contentious. A majority of the participants, including the European Union, the US, Australia and Canada, had argued for much tougher language, committing participants to ‘[phase out](#)’ fossil fuels. By one count (the UK’s [Guardian newspaper](#)), those in favour of the stronger language outnumbered those opposed by two-to-one. But they faced strong push-back from [petrostates](#), including COP28 hosts the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Russia. The world’s biggest carbon emitter, China, was ambiguous and non-comittal on the issue.

The soft phrasing of the final, accepted version of paragraph 28 is widely viewed as a win for the petrostates and their allies. This did not prevent the UAE summit presidency declaring the event a success in glowing terms. ‘We delivered [world first after world first](#)’, said Sultan Ahmed al Jabar.

This ‘success’ is reflected in a number of commitments made in the final text. It ‘recognises the need’ to [triple global renewable energy](#) capacity by 2030; to double

energy efficiency over the same period (para 28 [a]); to accelerate the phase down of ‘unabated coal power’ (para 28 [b]); to cut emissions from methane (para 28 [f]) and road transport systems (para 28 [g]); and to phase out ‘inefficient’ fossil fuel subsidies (para 28 [h]).

However, it should be remembered that not only do those responsible for hosting mega events tend to talk up the outcomes but, as cynics have observed, the Sultan has every reason to oppose phasing out fossil fuels. His day job is head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

Tucked among the exhortations contained in the final text, are two relatively small and little noted points which may assume much greater significance in future. Para 28 [e] approves the acceleration of [nuclear power](#) and paragraph 29 contains an explicit recognition of ‘a role’ for transitional fuels which implies [acceptance of natural gas](#). These have been massively contentious points in the past and in the climate action community generally.

This is the [first time](#) nuclear energy has been approved by the nearly 200 signatories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It is a call to ‘accelerate zero- and low- carbon technologies, with nuclear power being referred to as an example, alongside renewables as well as abatement and removal technologies. The [International Atomic Energy Association](#) said this is ‘nothing short of a historic milestone and a reflection of how much perspectives have changed’.

Gas has been contentious in the recent past. Developing countries have been especially angered by opposition to their developing their gas assets. African countries point out that the continent has a massive energy deficit and have argued that gas extraction and utilization is a development imperative. Gas releases about half the carbon per unit of energy of oil and unabated coal.

The final takeaway from COP28 is that financial issues remain utterly unresolved. COP28 seemed to get off to positive start by focusing on this very issue. The Loss and Damage Fund, agreed at COP27 last year, was operationalized on the first day of the Dubai event, with pledges [totaling US\\$700 million](#). This is intended to ‘compensate’ poor countries for economic losses suffered as a result of climate change. But no decision was taken about who would be eligible for compensation and under what circumstances. Nor is there any sense that a process to make the Fund financially sustainable had been contemplated.

The COP process has become notorious for its cavalier approach to the financial side of the climate change issue. Previous promises of financial assistance for poorer countries remain unfulfilled as the final text itself notes ([para 80](#)). 23 developed countries had agreed as long ago as COP15 held in Copenhagen in 2009 to find US\$100 billion a year for carbon emission mitigation. This target has never been met.

Finance was a major dividing line between developed and developing countries at COP28. An earlier [draft of the final text](#) contained a line requiring ‘high-income countries to provide low-income nations with long-term, scaled up, predictable, new additional finance’. This was removed before ratification leaving only a number of points which refer to ‘the growing (financial) gap(s)’ (para 66) in both mitigation and adaptation and the need to ‘increase (financing) manyfold’ (para 16 [b]).

The UN Climate Chief described the outcome as ‘[the beginning of the end](#)’ for fossil fuels. This puts a positive spin, from an environmentalist perspective, on a COP climate summit which, if anything, was characterised by a strong fight-back from hydrocarbon interests. After all, ending fossil fuels has been the underlying agenda ever since the first COP [held in Berlin in 1995](#).

Dubai also showed, more clearly than ever before, the limitations of a process where agreements are non-binding and compliance is dependent on the willingness of national governments acting within their own spheres. It might be argued that, as the failure of wealthier countries to finance the climate commitments of poorer nations demonstrates, there has not been sufficient realpolitik in earlier processes. The shortcomings of the Dubai summit may turn out, in the longer terms, to have been a milestone in addressing this shortcoming.