

COP28 Gave Us Another Agreement Full of Loopholes for Fossil Fuels



Pictured is the logo for the 28th United Nations' Climate Change Conference, or COP28, being held from Nov. 30 to Dec. 12, 2023, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (Image from cop28.com)

12-20-2023 It's further proof that sustained activism, not fossil fuel diplomacy, is our only hope for tackling the climate crisis.

The outcome of global climate summits has barely changed since the United Nations held the first Conference of the Parties (COP) in Berlin in 1995. Reaching an international consensus on climate action that might avert the worst effects of global warming and put the planet on a sustainable track has always been an elusive goal due to the power of the fossil fuel industry and political short-termism. In the end, “fossil fuel diplomacy” always prevails over the interests of humanity and the planet. Yet, somehow, congratulatory statements are always made at the conclusion of every COP. In the meantime, the business of the fossil fuel industry goes on uninterrupted and carbon emissions remain on an unsustainable growth trajectory despite clean energy’s growth.

[COP28](#), hosted by the autocratic and oil-rich United Arab Emirates, concluded on December 13, with countries that were signatories of the Paris Agreement pledging to contribute to “transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems.”

COP28 president Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, said that this is “a [robust action plan](#) to keep 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach.”

Hogwash. The deal reached at COP28 is not a plan, let alone a robust one, to keep the world from breaching the 1.5C climate threshold set by the Paris Agreement in 2015. An action plan includes specific, measurable and time-bound steps. The [agreement](#) of “transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems” is a climate pledge that does represent a progression beyond previous pledges, but it is still merely a pledge, i.e., a non-legally binding promise. President Joe Biden’s campaign was full of pledges on climate change and environmental justice but, since he entered the White House, his policies have been nothing short of a real [boost](#) for fossil fuels. Rich countries have failed to deliver on [funding pledges](#) to poor nations. And most countries are failing to transform their [climate commitments](#) into action. So much for pledges.

Adding insult to injury, “it is a plan that is led by the science,” said the very same oil man who just recently declared that there is “[no science](#)” to phasing out fossil fuels. The science is clear: Fossil fuels must go. But the term “phaseout” was rejected by petrostates like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates and by the world’s two biggest climate polluters — the United States and China.

The COP28 agreement also incorporated into the final text extremely feeble language toward the dirtiest of all fossil fuels — coal. Countries recognized the need to accelerate “efforts toward the phasing-down of unabated coal power,” which is language used in previous global climate summits, but the deal is silent on limiting new coal-fired power plants. China, in fact, is moving forward with new coal-fired power construction even as it pledges to reduce the use of coal during its next five-year plan. Moreover, the term “[unabated](#),” when it comes to fossil fuels, “means doing nothing to reduce carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas” and is actually associated with [carbon capture and storage technologies](#).

Indeed, indicative of the litany of loopholes included in the final COP28 text that essentially offer the fossil fuel industry major escape routes is the emphasis on unproven technologies like carbon capture and utilization and storage. The utilization of such technologies for an allegedly lower-emission future will only guarantee that fossil fuels remain around for the indefinite future. In fact, as

India's leading business newspaper, *The Economic Times* put it, the takeaway from COP28 is that fossil fuels are "[here to stay](#) for years."

In sum, to label the outcome of the COP28 global climate summit — a non-binding pledge based on feeble wording that doesn't even set any limits on the production of oil, gas and coal — a "historic" deal is simply preposterous.

But there is more to the failure of COP28. The deal operationalized the loss and damage fund to help vulnerable countries cope with the devastating impacts of global warming, but the financial pledges of around \$790 million [fall way short](#) of "the trillions eventually needed to support developing countries with clean energy transitions, implementing their national climate plans and adaptation efforts," according to the UN. The [economic cost](#) of loss and damage that developing countries need has been estimated to be greater than \$400 billion a year.

We are in a race against time to stop global warming. COP28 failed to rise to the occasion in a big way. "This agreement contains major industry escape hatches for disastrous gas expansion, plastics proliferation and dangerous climate scams like carbon capture and storage," Jean Su, director of the Energy Justice Program at the Center for Biological Diversity, told *Truthout*. "It also fails to offer both the needed financial support to developing countries and meaningful commitment from rich countries to move first. Getting 'fossil fuels' into the final decision is a win in process, but not in the practical fight for survival of life on Earth."

COP28 should be seen as a "historic" failure instead of a "historic," game-changing agreement. A historic climate agreement would be one that includes unwavering commitments to end fossil fuel subsidies; ban banks from funding new fossil fuel projects, as they have pumped trillions of dollars into oil, gas and coal since the Paris Agreement was adopted; wipe off the debt of all lower-income countries, which now spend several times more on serving debt than dealing with the devastating effects of global warming; and promote a coordinated plan to finance the [Global Green New Deal](#).

We are, of course, very far from the realization of such lofty expectations. In fact, COP28 confirmed what we already knew, which is that "fossil-fuel diplomacy" can never be expected to break out of the business-as-usual approach to climate change. Activism remains our only true hope. This is why it is more than crucial that the struggle to force governments to listen to the voices of their citizens not

only continues but intensifies, as the 2024 UN Climate Change Conference is less than a year away. (COP29 will be held in Azerbaijan — yet another autocratic and fossil-fuel-funded regime.) Indeed, as Su said, “People power has gotten us here and the momentum is stronger than ever. The fight to end oil, gas and coal must now be taken up at the country level with the United States leading the way by halting new fossil fuel project approvals and setting a strong nationally determined contribution for next year’s COP29.”

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