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COP28: Moving Forward

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Dec 26, 2023 COP28: Moving Forward

By Andrew Rowan, DPhil and Kathleen Rowan CEO, WellBeing International

As the world processes the outcomes of COP28 in the Persian Gulf, there is no shortage of claims and counter-claims regarding the success or failure of COP28. The tremendous interest in the matter was demonstrated by the 100,000 individuals who registered to attend COP28 (compared to the 40,000 attendees at the Glasgow COP26). The many differences of opinion are to be expected when the topic is as complicated as global climate change. However, COP28 could claim several significant firsts.

Global Stocktake

The 2015 Paris Agreement, finalized at COP21, required the first global stocktake at COP28. The Agreement's primary purpose was to keep the global average temperature below 2°C above pre-industrial levels while striving towards limiting the temperature increase to just 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. The global stocktake would provide a comprehensive review of the world's progress in addressing climate change, identify what still needs to be done, and determine how to accomplish what needs to be done. Ultimately, the global stocktake

identifies and informs the country Parties of the challenges to address and identifies actions and support for the next round of Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs by individual countries.

The Global stocktake process includes a collection of information from parties and nonparties (started in 2021 and concluded in June 2023), leading to the technical assessment of all the evidence (started mid-2022 and ended June 2023), culminating with the UN FCCC's *Technical Dialogue* with its findings and recommendations published on September 8, 2023. The *Technical Dialogue* states, “. . . the global community is not on track towards achieving the long-term goals of the Paris Agreement, despite progress made.” The report repeatedly emphasizes the urgency of acting now. Finally, during the political and last phase of the Stocktake, high-level discussions are conducted where Parties examine the findings and the political implications of those findings. Opportunities and challenges are identified. Finally, key political messages are summarized with recommendations for strengthening action and bolstering support.

As a result of the 2023 Global Stocktake process, individual countries are now expected to revisit their plans to address climate change – known as the Nationally Determined Contributions or NDCs – and to produce revised and more ambitious plans by 2025.

Fossil Fuels

The burning of fossil fuels is the leading **cause** of global warming today. The main sectors responsible for the production of greenhouse gas emissions are industry (24.2%), transport (16.2%), buildings (17.5%), agriculture and forestry (18.4%), cement and chemicals (5.2%), waste (3.2%) and other (15.3%).

Interestingly, fossil fuel use has not been cited in a COP decision text at any earlier climate COP. Therefore, it could be argued that citing fossil fuel use for the first time in a climate COP text was the most significant development at COP28, even though the agreed language called for “transitioning away” rather than “phasing out” fossil fuel use. According to **Damian Carrington** of the

Guardian, while “transitioning away” may not be strong enough for many at COP28 who hoped for a statement calling for the “phasing out” of fossil fuels, at least the direction of travel is finally clear.

Methane deserves special mention and is discussed in more detail in the companion article in this newsletter.

Food Systems

As regards food production and its growing impact on climate change and biodiversity loss, COP28 was the first climate COP to address food production directly. The absence of food production in climate change debates has been a significant oversight in previous climate discussions. Food production and land use change drive around **one-third** of global greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the **World Resources Institute**, COP28 was the meeting where “food finally took its place as central to the climate effort, with at least six notable outcomes,” including:

- 159 countries signed the COP28 UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action;
- The Declaration commits nations to integrate agriculture and food systems into their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) by 2025. The NDCs are national plans addressing how each country aims to meet specific targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and climate change mitigation, and
- Reorienting national policies and the \$700 billion in agricultural subsidies towards practices that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, ecosystem loss, and degradation, increased ecosystem resilience, and improved human and animal health.

Signatories to the Declaration also commit to having their relevant ministries produce a joint progress report on the above goals at COP29.

Climate Change and Public Health

It was also the first climate COP at which the links between climate change and public health were addressed during a Health Day on December 3. As noted in a recent *Lancet* **article**, life-threatening temperatures are becoming more frequent,

the transmission of deadly infectious diseases is rising as warming spreads the ecological niches available to major disease vectors like ticks and mosquitoes, and weather extremes are increasing food and shelter insecurity for millions of people. Climate change will exacerbate the global refugee crisis. At the same time, the *Lancet* article notes that climate change denial among populist global leaders threatens even the limited progress made so far.

Moving Forward

One may have hoped for more progress at COP28 in reducing global warming after the various weather extremes and heat waves experienced over the last two years. However, COP28 may be viewed as an important step toward improving climate resilience, human health, biodiversity, and global sustainability because of the above firsts. Having fossil fuels now cited in the formal COP text (and on the agenda) ensures that the role of fossil fuels will be addressed at future COPs. However, that is not to say that the path for future discussions of the issue will be free of detours and dead ends.

The Global Stocktake issues a clarion call for urgent and immediate action. However, given the wide range of issues to resolve, the many distractions, the requirement for consensus in UN decision-making, and the extraordinary logistics of coordinating close to 200 countries, WellBeing International suggests that the world should identify a smaller group of nations to be country catalysts where new policies could be tested to determine the most effective approaches to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Establishing smaller groups of collaborating countries should decrease communication and technology-sharing barriers and stimulate innovation and learning while addressing the urgent time constraints reported by the Global Stocktake. These country catalysts would be challenged to increase the scope and ambition of their National Determined Contribution (NDC) plans, driving global policies and implementation and accelerating climate action and support.

WellBeing International suggests two groups. The first would comprise the top 15 fossil fuel consumers, accounting for 75% of the world's fossil fuel

consumption. The second group would include the top 15 fossil fuel-producing countries, some of whom are also in the producer group, accounting for 81% of the world's production of fossil fuels. Providing the environment to accelerate climate action and persuading these "country catalysts" to be more ambitious positively impacts each country and the planet.
