

UNPACKING THE DUBAI CLIMATE MEETING

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Smoke rises from a coal-powered steel plant at Hehal village near Ranchi, Jharkhand. | Photo Credit: AP

As December draws near, so does the volume and intensity of global conversation around climate change negotiations. In early December, the 28th annual Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the United Nations (UN) Framework Convention on Climate Change will take place in Dubai.

While climate change diplomacy occurs in multiple fora including G20 meetings, UN summits, and bilateral fora, the COP remains the central place where the machinery of global climate governance gets built. Because all countries, not only the powerful, have a voice at COPs, questions of equity and vulnerability are more likely to be placed on the table.

Editorial | [Time for action: On COP28 climate meeting in Dubai](#)

In what has become a disturbingly familiar pattern, 2023 has seen devastating weather events: extreme heat in North Africa and Europe, wildfires in Canada and Hawaii, floods in India and Libya, and drought in the Horn of Africa. By September, scientists were expressing astonishment at how much land and ocean temperatures increase, and Antarctic sea ice decrease, have deviated from past records (likely exacerbated by an El Niño effect). It is likely that 2023 will be the warmest year on record.

But long-standing disagreements over what is a fair and equitable approach to addressing climate change, and who will pay, remain on the boil. To make matters worse, the geopolitical context is not favourable for enhanced cooperation. The U.S. and China have only recently tried to put the brakes on a deteriorating relationship and the Ukraine war and the horrific situation in Gaza have polarised public opinion and countries.

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Diplomats at the COP are tasked, then, with addressing an ever-more urgent problem under challenging conditions for global cooperation. And COPs are an unwieldy instrument with which to manufacture cooperation; they result in a torrent of words that are intended, but often fail, to unleash concrete actions. What can we expect from Dubai's COP?

At the top of the agenda is the [first Global Stocktake \(GST\)](#), a key part of the Paris Agreement

machinery. The GST is at the heart of a five yearly ‘ambition cycle’, which consists of country pledges for climate action, a global assessment of progress through the GST, and renewed country pledges. By assessing aggregate (not individual country) progress in mitigation, adaptation and support (finance, technology and capacity), the GST is meant to drive the ratcheting up of country pledges.

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The GST definitively finds, as do other UN and independent reports, that greenhouse gas emission pathways are not on track to limit warming to the Paris targets of 2°C or 1.5°C. But the agreement ends there; what is to be done about it? Developing countries argue that the GST must look at past efforts and bring accountability for the failure of many developed countries to do what they argue is consistent with equity; developed countries argue that developing countries will account for the bulk of future emissions and the GST should focus on limiting emissions going forward. The outcome of this debate will shape whether the disproportionate responsibility of developed countries for emissions is adequately reflected in future benchmarks for action. For example, one way to recognise responsibility is to expect developed countries to reach net zero emissions earlier than developing countries.

A core task of the GST is to inform and drive the next round of bottom-up national pledges — Nationally Determined Contributions — mandated by 2025. But should the GST be prescriptive about this, as some developed countries have argued, and call for pledges to be in specific forms, such as absolute emissions targets, and aligned with specific temperature targets, like 1.5°C? Those arguing for prescription say it is needed to accelerate progress. Yet, there is a catch. Benchmarking a country against a temperature outcome requires prior agreement on what each country can fairly be asked to do to limit emissions. But we have no such agreement, because this issue has been at the heart of fraught climate politics. Without it, any benchmarking is arbitrary and risks not adequately considering equity, which is why developing countries argue against a prescriptive approach.

Editorial | [Stocktaking the calamity: On climate crisis and the U.N. Global Stocktake report](#)

However, the GST not only calls for greater ambition, it also calls for enhanced implementation of pledges. This is a productive direction, because it focuses on actions countries can and should take now versus uncertain future statements of intent for future decades. To give implementation concrete form, the COP is likely to include language that calls for countries to triple renewable energy and double energy efficiency — ideas that were notably included in the recent G20 Delhi Leaders’ Declaration.

But not all of this text is agreed. Particularly contentious is a call for a time-bound phase down of fossil fuels, but here the exact phrasing will matter. India has been among those advocating a broad focus on all fossil fuels versus a narrow focus on coal alone, as was included in prior COPs. While coal is indeed the most polluting, addressing climate change requires addressing all fossil fuels. Moreover, oil and gas are much larger sources of energy in the developed world and critical to petrostates such as Dubai, while India depends more on coal. An escape hatch that oil and coal exporters may seek is the addition of the word ‘unabated’ before ‘fossil fuel’ to signal that plants using new technologies to capture their emissions may be allowed, giving fossil fuel a longer lease of life. The fossil fuel text is likely to be contentious, and win headlines at COP28.

Adaptation has often been the neglected dimension of climate negotiations. COP28 is an opportunity to correct this, because a ‘Global Goal on Adaptation’ is to be agreed, setting

unified, consistent targets for enhancing resilience and adaptive capacity. These have proved challenging to frame, because of varying contexts across countries and what is required for resilience. As with other issues, the question of ‘who pays’ is also likely to be prominent; since the last COP, there have been calls for a doubling of adaptation finance.

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An explosive issue is the establishment of a Loss and Damage Fund, agreement on which was a hard-won gain from the last COP; this COP is tasked with advancing progress. In a pre-negotiation, a fragile consensus was won on several thorny issues, including who will pay into the fund – developed countries are ‘urged’ and developing countries are ‘encouraged’; and who will receive – the vaguely worded ‘particularly vulnerable’ countries. Perhaps most contentious, the World Bank was agreed as an interim host of the fund, but under strict governance guidelines to provide a greater say for recipient countries. Whether this consensus holds or unravels will be a key issue for COP28.

The GST is careful to call for ambition not only in action but also support for those actions, notably finance. Over a decade ago, developed countries had pledged to provide an arbitrary \$100 billion a year by 2020. In addition to the deadline being unmet, the amount was likely too little to meet needs. By COP28, the discussion has shifted to a concrete assessment of needs to support mitigation and adaptation, with numbers hovering in the low trillion. Coming up with a number is only a starting point; the contentious issues remain around how it will be mobilised. How important is public versus private funds? Will private capital flow in response to efforts to ‘de-risk’ investment opportunities? Are larger changes in the global financial environment needed, including debt restructuring and reform of multilateral development banks? How can they be brought about?

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As the finance discussion suggests, climate change is now on the menu at the geopolitical and geoeconomic high table. The stakes for countries from COPs are consequential, in terms of climate impacts, fossil fuel energy politics, and competitiveness in emergent energy technologies. All this will not be resolved in Dubai, but it will be an important marker in the slow unfolding of global climate politics.

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