

## What really happened at COP-28 in Dubai: A personal view

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### Abstract

This article describes the most meaningful developments at the 28<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP-28) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which took place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, November 30 – December 13, 2023. This is done, in part, by reflecting on the history of these annual meetings, drawing on the author's experience of participating annually over a period of sixteen years. This history reveals the evolution over time that has taken place in the relative importance in the annual meetings of the official negotiations compared with the simultaneous participation of civil society. The press coverage of COP-28 is examined, along with the important role played by two countries – China and the United States, the dramatic increase in attention given to methane, and two disappointments, one associated with funding for adaptation, and the other connected with provisions for carbon markets.

**Keywords:** global climate change, international governance, methane.

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### 1. Introduction

If one read newspaper articles, listened to radio programs, or watched television news shows in mid-December, 2023, about the 28<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP-28) of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change or UNFCCC (United Nations 1992), held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, one got the distinct impression that it was either a great success (Mooney, Williams, and Kerr 2023), a distinct failure (Agence France-Presse 2023), or somewhere between the two (Sengupta 2023), based to a considerable degree on a paragraph in the COP's closing statement, officially the "Decision of the First Global Stocktake" (United Nations 2023) and unofficially the "UAE Consensus," about the future of fossil fuels, in particular, a statement endorsing "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner ..." (United Nations 2023, p. 5).

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I spent a week at COP-28 – the sixteenth COP I have attended – in December, 2023, and in the remainder of this article, I seek to step back from the headlines to offer my personal assessment of what happened at COP-28 (and what did not happen), reflect on the importance of China-USA cooperation (and sometimes co-leadership), describe the surprising evolution of the role of civil society in these annual Conferences of the Parties, delve into COP-28’s striking focus on methane emissions, highlight two significant disappointments at the COP, and offer some brief thoughts about the path ahead.

## **2. Behind (and beyond) the headlines**

COP-28, in my judgment, was successful, but not in the way success has been characterized in most articles and commentaries. In the end, the above endorsement of “transitioning away from fossil fuels” (instead of language proposed by greener interests of “phasing down” or even “phasing out” fossil fuels) combined with the endorsement of “accelerating zero- and low-emission technologies, including ... renewables, nuclear, abatement and removal technologies such as carbon capture and utilization and storage ...” (United Nations 2023, p. 5) was sufficient to win the approval of the wealthy oil-producing countries in the Middle East, the large multinational energy companies (who have come to recognize that global movement away from fossil fuels is all but inevitable), the industrialized world, and developing countries (Reed 2023). I also recognize that some commentaries (Wagner 2023) have also praised the closing statement for endorsing the tripling of global renewable-energy capacity, doubling of the annual rate of energy-efficiency improvements, and “accelerating and substantially reducing non-carbon-dioxide emissions globally, including in particular methane emissions by 2030” (United Nations 2023, p. 5). Later in this article, I turn to the methane issue.

I leave it to the reader to draw your own conclusion about whether the “UAE Consensus” is a vacuous statement of hopes and aspirations, or, in the words of COP-28 President Dr. Sultan Al Jaber, an impressive “paradigm shift that has the potential to redefine our economies” and “a robust action plan to keep 1.5 within reach” (Al Jaber 2023). But, having participated in these annual UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties for many years, I do not think the most important outcome of COP-28 is contained in that closing statement, which is essentially a non-binding resolution about future ambitions. I say this despite my recognition that the closing statement about fossil fuels and – more importantly – the press coverage it has received may have some symbolic, signaling value, and can “normalize ideas and measures once seen as too radical to be globally agreed” (Editorial Board 2023). Indeed, the statement has received the lion’s share of press attention, because the press and many others like to characterize these annual COPs as either “successes” or “failures,” and the closing statement provides a very convenient focal point.

The reality is that the negotiations at most COPs are neither successes nor failures (except perhaps when a new international agreement is enacted, as with the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 (United Nations 1997) and the Paris Agreement in 2015 (United Nations 2015), both legally binding international treaties. Naming any of the negotiations at the twenty-six other COPs as successes or failures makes no more sense

than it would be to characterize the annual World Economic Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland, as successes or failures. Both are extensive, complex get-togethers, based on bottom-up processes. It is not as if the corporate CEOs meeting in Davos agree to take action, and then go home to their respective Boards of Directors to implement their Davos commitments. The causality runs in precisely the opposite direction. So too with the annual COPs, where the delegations of the various “Parties,” the 195+ countries, bring with them their predisposed domestic priorities and perceptions of acceptable international cooperation. Each COP’s official outcome is essentially the aggregation of those.

What will drive meaningful action around the world – that is, massive cuts in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – is the combination of market realities and public policies, with both having impacts on the other. The most important public policies – whether carbon taxes, cap-and-trade instruments, performance standards, or technology standards (Stavins 2022a) – have been and will be enacted at the national level, the regional level in the case of the European Union, and sometimes the sub-national level, as in California. Those policy developments are linked with what happens at the annual COPs, but the direction of causation is fundamentally bottom-up, not top-down.

### **3. The most important COP-28 development**

Ever since Donald Trump became President of the United States in January, 2017, a major question has been when would the United States and China return to the highly effective co-leadership roles they played during the years of the Obama administration in the runup to the Paris Agreement. This was an important question at COP-26 in Glasgow in 2021, but it turned out that last year’s COP-27 provided an answer, although in somewhat surprising fashion.

As I wrote at the time (Stavins 2022b), the most important development during COP-27 held November 7-20, 2022, in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, took place 6,000 miles away in Bali, Indonesia, when U.S. President Joe Biden and China President Xi Jinping met on November 14, 2022, on the sidelines of the G20 summit, shook hands, and engaged in a three-hour conversation in which, among other topics, they signaled their return to the cooperative stance that had previously been so crucial for international progress on climate change. That three-hour meeting marked the end of the breakoff of talks that had been initiated by China in response to Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s trip to Taiwan in August of that year. The two leaders expressed their intention to not allow disagreements regarding international trade, human rights, movement away from democracy in Hong Kong, and Taiwan’s security to contaminate their cooperation on climate change.

The discussion between the two heads of state quickly and explicitly trickled down to the heads of the respective negotiating teams at COP-27 – John Kerry of the United States and Xie Zhenhua of China. They were longtime friends, but they had not engaged in discussions or cooperation on climate change because of the problems that had existed at the highest level between the two governments. But, after the Biden-Xi meeting in Bali, statements from both John Kerry and Xie Zhenhua indicated that the two countries would resume cooperation. I expressed

hope at the time that there might even be a return to the co-leadership on climate change policy which China and the United States had previously exercised and which had disappeared long before Pelosi's trip to Taiwan, namely with the beginning of the Trump administration and continued throughout much of the first two years of the Biden administration (Stavins 2022b).

But it was not until much more recently that it became clear that China and the USA might truly resume cooperation and co-leadership, and that was two weeks before COP-28, when the most important development for COP-28 (Dubai) took place 8,000 miles away, in Sunnylands, California, when the same two heads of state met (Xu 2023) and signaled in even more certain terms, and in writing in their "Sunnylands Statement," their renewed cooperation on climate change (U.S. Department of State 2023). U.S.-China cooperation is essential for meaningful progress on climate change, and the Sunnylands Statement – jointly signed by the two presidents in November, 2023 – is ultimately more important than any individual accomplishments at COP-28 in Dubai.

#### **4. Important context for change: The surprising evolution of the annual COPs**

It is helpful for fully appreciating what happened at COP-28 to reflect on the evolution of the annual COPs since they began with COP-1 in Berlin in 1995, or at least over the sixteen years that I have been attending these festivities as the leader of Harvard's delegation, beginning with COP-13 in Bali, Indonesia, in 2007.

In fact, for full understanding, we need to begin even before COP-1 in 1995, with the United Nations conference that took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 and that produced the UNFCCC. The text specifies (in paragraph 6 of Article 7) something quite unusual for a process of ongoing international negotiations, namely that "any body ... whether ... governmental or non-governmental, which is qualified in matters covered by the Convention, and which has informed the secretariat of its wish to be represented at a session of the Conference of the Parties as an observer, may be so admitted..." (United Nations 1992). Thus, there is an explicit role for observer organizations – largely from civil society (environmental NGOs of all kinds, trade associations, universities, etc.) – in the annual "Conference of the Parties" of the UNFCCC.

Over time, there have been at first gradual and more recently quite dramatic changes in the relative importance and prominence of the core country delegations of negotiators (typically about 10,000 people) versus "observers" from civil society (recently about 30,000 to 40,000 people, reaching 70,000 at COP-28 in Dubai). When I first participated in the COPs sixteen years ago, I would say that 90-95% of the meaningful action was in the negotiations, with 5-10% among the participants from civil society.

But by the time of COP-28 this past year, I would peg 10% of the meaningful action as being within the negotiations, and 90% among the myriad events (including official "Side Events," unofficial presentations and sessions, meetings, and interactions of all kinds) among participants from civil society. Except when there is a legal agreement to be negotiated (Kyoto, Paris), most action is simply outside of the ne-

gotiations. One can think of the COP as a circus in which the “main event” is eclipsed with increasing frequency by the “side shows” (Young 2023).

In the words of Somini Sengupta, writing in the *New York Times*, during COP-28, “there are two climate summits taking place in Dubai. One is the gathering of bleary-eyed, sharp-tongued diplomats parsing over every word and comma” in the closing statement, but “the bigger event is happening outside the negotiating rooms. It’s part trade fair, part protest stage, part debate forum” (Sengupta 2023). Included in the “trade fair” were battery entrepreneurs, solar panel manufacturers, venture capitalists, financial brokers, mining executives, real estate developers, tech startups, green cement manufacturers, construction companies, global food suppliers, fertilizer producers, pharmaceutical companies, and representatives of dozens of other sectors (Tigue 2023).

Hence, I christened this year’s festivities in Dubai, “Climate Expo 2023” (Tigue 2023). I do not say this with cynicism or even skepticism, because I recognize, as I explained above, that this is a bottom-up process like the World Economic Forum in Davos each year, and like Davos, the Climate Expo plays a role, indeed a potentially important one. Great examples of this in Dubai were in the form of events targeting a specific non-CO<sub>2</sub> greenhouse gas-methane.

## 5. The Striking Prominence of Methane at COP-28

Something that was very striking at COP-28 was the degree to which methane emissions received greatly increased attention, not necessarily in the negotiations, but in the multitude of discussions and side agreements forged and publicized among governments (the Global Methane Pledge to cut emissions by 30% by 2030) and – importantly – among diverse members of civil society, including business associations, environmental NGOs, and academics. This was a dramatic change from COP-27, just one year ago. I am pleased to say that our Harvard delegation was a major contributor to this, with the Salata Institute’s Initiative on Global Methane Emissions Reduction (Stavins 2023a), which I have the privilege and pleasure of directing.

The importance of reducing methane emissions is linked with the fact those emissions account for about 30% of the warming that has taken place since pre-industrial times, and may be responsible for nearly half of the warming taking place this decade (Wagner 2023). At COP-28, the action on methane *outside of the UNFCCC negotiations* was quite remarkable. As the COP was just getting going, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency finalized its regulation to cut methane emissions from the oil and gas sector by approximately 80% (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2023), and the USA pledged at COP-28 to marshal some \$1 billion to help poor countries cut their methane emissions (Niiler 2003), which led Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and three other countries to join the Global Methane Pledge, bringing total participation to 155 governments. Considering the high rates of emissions from these countries, this was a very important development.

Also at COP-28, the United States, China, and the UAE held a methane summit, which featured a series of relevant pledges. And the World Bank focused on its Global Flaring and Methane Reduction Partnership (World Bank 2023), as well as the Global Methane Hub launching its Enteric Fermentation Accelerator (Global

Methane Hub 2023). In addition to the \$1 billion in new grant funding noted above, international financial institutions approved more than \$3.5 billion in new investments in methane-reducing projects since COP-27.

Of potentially greater importance, a large group of leading oil and gas companies pledged to achieve near zero methane emissions by 2030, and to completely eliminate routine flaring by the same year. The Oil and Gas Methane Partnership 2.0 now counts 120 companies with operations in 60 countries, covering 35% of world oil and gas production, and more than 70% of LNG flows (United Nations Environment Program 2023). Linked with this, the Oil and Gas Climate Initiative (OGCI) expanded its Satellite Monitoring Campaign (Oil and Gas Climate Initiative 2023).

Of course, if venting/flaring can be reduced/eliminated at reasonable cost, it is very much in the interest of these oil and gas companies to do so, since it means keeping more of a merchantable product in the pipeline for sale. But that does not detract from the potential importance of the initiatives. More broadly, whether these multiple pledges and actions from private industry, civil society, and governments will result in real emission reductions will ultimately depend on adequate measurement, reporting, verification, and enforcement (Volcovici 2023), which are among the targets of the research and outreach that constitute the Harvard Initiative to Reduce Global Methane Emissions.

## **6. Two Disappointments at COP-28**

Adaptation to climate change that is already taking place and will continue to take place regardless of actions to mitigate emissions received a great deal of attention with 84 uses of the word in the COP-28 Decision (United Nations 2023), but there are no actionable commitments (Lo 2023). Indeed, it seems that the progress made last year at COP-27 on creating a fund for Loss and Damage (Stavins 2022b), and financial contributions to the fund announced at COP-28, which reached \$700 million, may have diverted attention and action away from the Adaptation Fund. That said, it should be recognized that the total now pledged for supplying the Loss and Damage Fund amounts to much less than 1% of what the eventual demand is likely to be (Lakhani 2023).

There was also considerable disappointment regarding support for international carbon markets under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. I have written extensively in the past about how international linkage of national policy instruments can bring down aggregate abatement costs and thus encourage greater ambition, and the consequent potential importance of Article 6.2 of the Paris Agreement (Stavins 2016) for facilitating such linkages (Bodansky *et al.* 2015) and preventing double-counting (Schneider *et al.* 2019) of achievements toward meeting Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Since the “Rulebook” for Article 6 was completed at COP-26 in Madrid (Stavins 2019), I have been concerned about the directions that the use of 6.2 seems to be taking (Stavins 2022b).

If that concern was not bad enough, the negotiations at COP-28 in Dubai took several steps backward, producing a major setback for international carbon markets (Manuell 2023), with some countries attempting to re-open what had been settled issues regarding the nature of the 6.2 mechanism, as well as ongoing politicization

of other parts of Article 6 (International Emission Trading Association 2023). In the end, Bolivia was able to block steps toward implementation of market-based approaches under the Paris Agreement (although international exchanges can take place independently).

## 7. Concluding thoughts and the path ahead

First, “COP-28 was a coming-out party for private sector climate action,” to use the phrase of Nathaniel Keohane, president of C2ES (Keohane 2023). As I noted above, hundreds of companies from very diverse sectors – including but by no means limited to energy generation (fossil and renewable) – were present to showcase technologies, management practices, adaptation, and finance in support of fulfilling the promise of the Paris Agreement, and the UNFCCC more broadly. For some observers, this was a distinctly negative aspect of COP-28, while others (including myself) found the participation of private industry to add to the diversity, the meaningful contributions, and perhaps the pragmatism of COP-28.

Second, COP-28 completed the first 5-year Global Stocktake. Countries are to submit their next round of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement prior to COP-30 in 2025.

Third, COP-28 was a logistical success, with an excellent venue, with real buildings, not temporary structures. It was spread over an area larger than New York City’s Central Park, but the weather was perfect (albeit on the warm side)!

However, it’s not clear that such positive statements can be said about the locations of the next two COPs. COP-29, set for November 11-24, 2024, will take place in Baku, Azerbaijan (where, by the way, the oil and gas industry constitutes two-thirds of GDP), and COP-30 will take place November 10-21, 2025, in Belém do Pará in the Amazon region of Brazil.

Whether I will maintain my streak of annual COP participation is, as always, an open question.

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