

Headline: Explainer: What happens at a COP climate summit?

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A man documents a hanged penguin representation at the Tuvalu pavilion during the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland, Britain, November 1, 2021. REUTERS FILE PHOTO

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Imagine a massive industry expo with the drama of a dozen simultaneous political conferences, a few flashes of impassioned protest and the occasional crowd crush to glimpse a climate celebrity.

Such is the scene at the annual COP conference, this year being held Nov. 30-Dec. 12 in the Emirati city of Dubai. Staged across a cavernous campus of pop-up buildings and exhibition halls, this year's COP28 will bring together more than 70,000 people from nearly 200 countries.

Here's how the climate summit unfolds on the ground.

The UAE has spent the last year laying the diplomatic groundwork for this year's summit. But it officially takes on the COP presidency only at the opening ceremony, which features welcome speeches and opportunities to bang the gavel.

One of those gavel bangs will approve the official agenda. This can be a big moment if, like at COP27, a new and important issue makes it onto the summit's to-do list.

During the first few days, national leaders jet in for what is called the "High-Level Segment" involving back-to-back speeches in the venue's main plenary hall. They often go beyond the three-minute time limit.

Leaders also speak at side events, news conferences or with each other in bilateral huddles over what they think the COP should achieve.

This political oomph is meant to boost ambition and set the summit on the right track.

The venue's "Blue Zone" for these official talks and panel discussions also features country pavilions, or temporary offices for each national delegation.

Some of these are festooned with decoration or kitted out in promotional gear, as countries use the spaces for networking meetings, promoting national brands or publicizing projects. Only accredited participants can enter this area.

Another area dubbed the "Green Zone" features exhibition booths populated by companies, non-profit groups and climate campaigners from around the world. In this warehouse-type space, open to the registered public, one can easily find free coffee, or hear a multinational sales pitch, or take in an indigenous Amazonian cultural display.

There is a third section of the conference venue for the global media, where hundreds of reporters spread out across rows of desks to write up the day's conference news for publications back home. Camera crews catch interviews with conference attendees, and broadcast teams edit video stories to send across the world.

While the leaders and lobbyists face the public, the national delegations of ministers and bureaucrats are out of sight negotiating the details of a final agreement from the summit.

Each agenda item forms a separate negotiating stream, handled concurrently by different working groups. These efforts, which build most of the policy machinery meant to tackle climate change, tend to make gradual progress from year to year.

Deals must be agreed by consensus and finding that consensus among nearly 200 countries can be slow going.

To bring structure to the conference for public-facing events, COP organizers assign themes to each day – touching on a huge array of climate-related issues.

This year's themes include everything from climate finance and education to youth, nature and public health. Midway through the summit – on Dec. 7 – organizers have scheduled a “day of rest” when official programming is paused.

The country delegations, however, often continue closed-door negotiations through this day, while industry leaders and nonprofits continue to hold side events.

Roughly halfway through the summit, the COP28 presidency begins working on the draft of a final agreement to capture progress made in working group negotiations and pledges offered on the plenary floor.

Shaping this draft agreement is where the UAE presidency has the most power to exert its influence.

At this stage, divisions still remain – and countries begin pressing one another for support or haggling over compromises. Deadlocked negotiators often look to their governments for new guidance or mandates. Cabinet ministers join the debate.

Final negotiations over a summit agreement, or “cover decision,” take place over the last two days of the summit, with the focus turning to how much can be achieved before the gavel comes down in the final plenary.

The cover decision is essentially a statement setting out the high-level political agreements on key issues; it embodies what the summit has achieved and the broad goals that every country has agreed to pursue.

In the last days, optimism for a cover decision often gives way to the reality of entrenched positions, and an extra day or two is needed to reach a deal.

Many past COP summits, including last year's COP27, have dragged on after the exhibitions have been dismantled and the lobbyists and activists have gone home – leaving only the negotiators, journalists and cleaning staff on the ground.

The end, when it comes, can be dramatic. At COP26, last-minute interventions and frantic compromises were fought out in front of news cameras on the plenary floor.

But it can also come quickly and out of the blue. At COP27 the presidency presented a tired-out conference with a dead-of-the-night deal they had little time to read.

The gaveling to signify adoption of a cover decision represents an emotional climax to the event. But there are other smaller agreements that get gaveled after that, as the outcomes of each working group are formally approved.

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Everyone heads home then to get some sleep.