THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

January 18, 2024

COP28: A Historic yet Flawed Outcome on Phasing Out Fossil Fuels

By: Harjeet Singh

It's taken almost 30 years for climate negotiations to name and act on fossil fuels, the biggest cause of climate change. We now have a deal, even if it has many shortcomings. The next climate summit must capitalize on the momentum from COP28's commitment to transitioning away from fossil fuels.

In the face of escalating global climate challenges, the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) held in Dubai last month was a critical event in the international community's response to the crisis.

Central to COP28 was the first-ever Global Stocktake, a distinctive process under the Paris Agreement designed for the periodic review and enhancement of climate action ambitions. This process, setting the Paris Agreement apart from most international agreements, is not just a technical exercise but a vital mechanism for holding parties accountable and urging them towards the pace and direction necessary to fulfil the agreement's goals. A landmark yet insufficient decision at COP28 was the agreement to transition away from fossil fuels, critical in light of the target to limit the warming to 1.5°C.

The gathering culminated in the "UAE Consensus," marked by its focus on the long-standing issue of fossil fuel dependency. However, as I noted elsewhere, the outcomes were "marred by loopholes that offer the fossil fuel industry numerous escape routes, including reliance on unproven, unsafe technologies." These loopholes allow for continued investment in certain fossil fuel projects under the guise of innovation and solutions.

Fossil fuels - coal, oil and gas - are by far the largest contributor to global climate change, accounting for over 75 per cent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and nearly 90 per cent of all carbon dioxide (CO2) emissions.

According to the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the largest source of CO2 is combustion of fossil fuels in energy conversion systems like boilers in electric power plants, engines in aircraft and automobiles, and in cooking and heating within homes and businesses (approximately 64% of emissions). Fossil fuels are also a major source of methane (CH4), the second biggest contributor to global warming.

> A landmark yet insufficient decision at COP28 was the agreement to transition away from fossil fuels, critical in light of the target to limit global warming to 1.5°C.

The COP28 decision on fossil fuel transition leaves many unanswered questions, especially regarding how historical polluters should take a fair share of climate action. This includes steps taken domestically and making financial commitments to assist developing countries in a globally just transition.

The US leads as the largest historical emitter, having released over 509 gigatonnes of CO2 since 1850, accounting for approximately 20% of the world's total emissions, as per Carbon Brief's 2021 analysis. Following closely, China holds the second spot with an 11% share, trailed by Russia at 7%, Brazil at 5%, Indonesia at 4%, and India at 3.4%. Brazil and Indonesia's significant emissions largely result from land-use changes. Meanwhile, major European nations with colonial histories, such as Germany and the UK, contribute 4% and 3% respectively to the global total, excluding emissions from their colonial territories.

A 2023 analysis by Carbon Brief reveals a significant shift in historical responsibility for climate change when colonial rule is considered. This analysis of the period 1850-2023 shows the US (21%) and China (12%) still at the top, but the proportion of emissions from former colonial powers increases substantially. France sees a 50% increase in its share of historical emissions, the UK's share nearly doubles, the Netherlands' nearly triples, and Portugal's more than triples. Collectively, the EU+UK's contribution to warming rises by nearly a third, reaching 19%. Conversely, former colonies like India see their share of historical responsibility decrease (by 15%, falling below the UK), with Indonesia's share decreasing by 24% and Africa's already minor contribution also dropping by 24%.

It is crucial to recognise that CO2 emissions dating back hundreds of years continue to impact current climate change. The present level of global warming is a result of the aggregate cumulative CO2 emissions over time.

Historical, yet Flawed Outcome

It's taken almost 30 years for climate negotiations to properly name the biggest cause of climate change - fossil fuels. The COP28 decision to transition away from all fossil fuels - coal, oil, and gas - marks a historic shift in global climate policy. This delay in recognition reflects the power of the fossil fuel industry which, in connivance with rich countries, has been protecting its interests.

For decades, complex negotiations have centred on intricate accounting and market mechanisms related to greenhouse gas emissions, effectively obscuring the need to confront the fundamental cause of climate change: fossil fuels. The shift reflects the rise of people's power in calling out the nexus and forcing the governments to act in favour of people and the planet.

This groundbreaking agreement, the first of its kind, signifies a collective commitment to a cleaner energy system, aiming for global net-zero emissions by 2050. The targets, including tripling renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency by 2030, were set with the aim of limiting global warming to 1.5°C, highlighting the urgent need for deep, rapid, and sustained reductions in global greenhouse gas emissions. It specifically calls for reductions of emissions of 43% by 2030 and 60% by 2035, relative to 2019 levels, with the aim of achieving net zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050, as outlined in the Sixth Assessment Report of the IPCC.

However, the decision falls short of adequately assigning responsibility to historical emitters for swift action in line with their fair share in emissions. The agreement's loopholes, which are deeply concerning, include: the phase-down of only unabated coal power; treating fossil gas as a low-emission technology and as a bridge fuel; the allowance for continued fossil fuel use through the inclusion of Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS); and the encouragement of nuclear energy. These factors could potentially delay the transition to a fully renewable energy system.

At COP28, twenty countries, mostly European and North American, signed a pledge to triple their nuclear energy capacity by 2050. It will mean that nuclear energy could go from meeting 10% of the world's current electricity needs to almost a third within 25 years.

> [T]he decision falls short of adequately assigning responsibility to historical emitters for swift action in line with their fair share in emissions.

Environmentalists express several concerns regarding nuclear power in the energy mix. Key issues include the safety risks highlighted by disasters like Chernobyl and Fukushima, the long-term management of hazardous radioactive waste, and environmental impacts throughout the nuclear fuel cycle. There are also concerns related to the long development times that contrast with the urgent need to address climate change, high costs and economic challenges of nuclear energy, especially compared to the falling costs of renewables like wind and solar. The risks of "greenwashing" further complicate this narrative.

Scientists and activists call CCS a false narrative under which the industry can seek public subsidies and carbon credits, financing the extraction of more fossil fuels and generating new streams of profit through carbon capture and transactions in carbon markets. Of the CCS facilities that exist today, three quarters are for Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR), i.e. to extract more oil. Yet numerous studies denounce their failure and their lack of energy, climate and economic viability. A recent study by Climate Analytics, that calls CCS a looming 'carbon bomb' shows that relying on CCS to 'phase out' fossil fuels could emit more than 86 billion tonnes of additional CO2 by 2050.

Unchecked Influence of Fossil Fuel Industry

According to an analysis by the Kick Big Polluters Out (KBPO) coalition, at least 2,456 fossil fuel lobbyists were granted access to the COP28 summit in Dubai. Their unprecedented presence at these crucial climate talks signals a significant influence from representatives of some of the world's biggest polluters.

The statement issued by the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) on the COP28 Dubai Summit outcome sharply critiques the failure of governments to deliver an unequivocal commitment to end the fossil fuel era. "The test for governments was not just to talk about fossil fuels, it was to act on them, by delivering an unequivocal commitment to end the era of fossil fuels, to leave no loopholes for delay or inaction, and to ensure rich polluters move first and fastest, with real money on the table. They failed profoundly - underlining the need for alternative, complementary, and effective governance spaces to deliver a fossil fuel phaseout that

is full, fair, fast, and funded."

A critical analysis of COP28's outcomes underscores the urgent need for more decisive and equitable actions and a new global framework to phase out fossil fuels.

How Can We Change Course

Despite the historic COP28 agreement for a "transition away from fossil fuels," the grim reality is a stark contrast of charting an opposite course. Five Global North countries with the greatest economic means to rapidly phase out production - the United States, Canada, Australia, Norway, and the United Kingdom - are responsible for a majority (51 percent) of planned expansion from new oil and gas fields through 2050. This expansion represents a defiance of the spirit of global cooperation and mocks the hard-fought progress at COP28, posing a direct challenge to vulnerable communities already suffering from climate catastrophes. The gap between rhetoric and reality is widening, threatening to shatter the fragile trust built at COP28.

> A Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty would restrict the expansion of fossil fuel production and infrastructure, placing enforceable commitments behind the Paris Agreement's aspirations.

The Production Gap Report 2023 reveals that new fossil fuel development is proceeding at a pace 110% higher than what is consistent with limiting warming to 1.5 degrees. Such expansion undermines development, increases the risk of stranded assets, leads to expensive energy, and harms health and livelihoods.

In light of this, the need for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty becomes crucial. Building upon the goals established at COP28, this treaty would provide the necessary framework to effectively tackle the phase-out challenge. Similar to the Non-Proliferation Treaty for nuclear weapons, it would restrict the expansion of fossil fuel production and infrastructure, placing enforceable commitments behind the Paris Agreement's aspirations. The treaty could define each nation's contribution to the decline and phase-out of fossil fuels based on their fair share, setting targets and timelines, and fostering international cooperation with justice and equity at its core.

History has demonstrated the effectiveness of treaties in shaping global policies. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty curbed the proliferation of nuclear weapons, while the Landmines Ban Treaty and the Tobacco Framework Convention significantly impacted their respective industries. The Montreal Protocol successfully phased out ozone depleting substances, and currently, a treaty negotiation is underway for plastics.

A foundation for the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty is being laid by a bloc of 12 nations - including Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Antigua and Barbuda, Fiji, Colombia, Timor Leste, and others - who have called for a global coalition to negotiate such a treaty. They are joined by thousands of scientists, Nobel laureates, organizations like the European Parliament and World Health Organization, and nearly 100 cities and subnational governments.

It is time for other governments to join this core group of countries ready to negotiate a mandate for a Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. This treaty must not only be a vision but a guiding force for a just transition away from fossil fuels, creating a world powered by clean energy founded on climate justice.

International Cooperation for a Global Just Transition

COP28 witnessed a series of financial pledges to enable countries, particularly those with limited means, to actively participate in global climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Nevertheless, a significant concern raised at COP28 was the glaring gap between the financial pledges made and the actual needs of developing countries. While these commitments represent a positive step, they fall markedly short of the estimated amounts required for effective climate action. This shortfall poses a substantial challenge, potentially hindering the ability of developing nations to implement their climate action plans and transition to sustainable energy solutions.

The Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance estimated that emerging markets and developing countries, excluding China, need $2.4 trillion of investment a year for just energy transition, adaptation and resilience, loss and damage, and the conservation and restoration of nature by 2030.

Developing countries face significant hurdles in terms of financial resources, technological access, and policy frameworks. The disparity in capabilities among nations necessitates a cooperative and supportive international environment, ensuring that every country, regardless

of its economic status, can contribute equitably and effectively to global climate goals.

Financial support also plays a vital role in fostering technological innovation and capacity building, key to achieving the Paris Agreement's goals. The role of climate finance extends beyond mere monetary assistance; it is a crucial enabler of climate action. Adequate funding is essential for developing countries to transition to clean energy, invest in climate-resilient infrastructure, and adapt to and address the adverse impacts of climate change.

Additionally, the progress achieved at COP28, with the operationalisation of the Loss and Damage Fund and advancements in defining the Global Goal on Adaptation, faces significant challenges due to the existing finance gap. While these steps are notable, their effectiveness could be significantly undermined by the current shortfall in scaled-up and sustained financial resources.

The initial pledges to the Loss and Damage Fund fall short when compared to the immense scale of losses and damages incurred by vulnerable nations. Similarly, the commitment to scale up global adaptation efforts requires substantial financial support for effective implementation. Without a substantial increase in financial contributions and more efficient allocation of funds, these initiatives risk failing to meet the urgent and escalating needs of countries most affected by climate change.

> The role of climate finance extends beyond mere monetary assistance; it is a crucial enabler of climate action.

The quest to keep global warming within the 1.5°C threshold, as agreed upon in the Paris Agreement, represents a formidable challenge, accentuated by the outcomes of COP28. The current trajectory of global greenhouse gas emissions suggests we are perilously close to exceeding this limit. Surpassing 1.5°C could lead to more severe weather events, greater loss of biodiversity, and increased risk to human health and food security.

Looking ahead, the next annual UN climate summit, COP29 in Azerbaijan, must capitalize on the momentum from COP28's commitment to transitioning away from fossil fuels. This summit is crucial for establishing more robust commitments on equitably phasing out fossil fuels and enhancing climate finance, particularly for the most vulnerable countries. It presents a vital opportunity to accelerate a global just transition by putting people first. This can be achieved through crafting a new global framework in the form of a Fossil Fuel Treaty that complements the Paris Agreement. This path is not just a choice but a necessity for a sustainable and resilient future for our planet.

Harjeet Singh is an activist advocating for climate and social justice globally. He is currently the Global Engagement Director at the Fossil Fuel Treaty Initiative. He has co-founded a social enterprise, Satat Sampada, dedicated to promoting sustainable environmental practices, such as organic food and farming, in India and beyond. He tweets at @harjeet11.