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**A fair COP? Lindsey Fielder Cook reflects on last year’s climate change conference in Dubai**

**By Lindsey Fielder Cook**

The climate change Conference of Parties (COP28) in Dubai broke a certain silence. For the first time, States overcame strong fossil fuel extraction wealthy resistance, and confirmed the need for ‘*transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems*’. Courage was led by Colombia, a fossil fuel dependent country traumatized by debt and war, whose Minister announced a ban on new fossil fuel extraction. She then called for a ceasefire in Gaza to stop the killing and suffering of people. She was not alone.

Some media headlines captured the historic fossil fuel language, then went silent or focused on loopholes. So too in many media outlets the coverage of ongoing dehumanization and loss of life in Gaza. Denial and silence do not make us well.

For the last 75 years, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) offices in Geneva and New York have supported peace and justice at the international level. These processes, like the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are a mix of legally binding and voluntary actions. While not a magic wand, the processes uphold ideals and can send powerful signals for global action, especially when one’s domestic realities are crushing.

Initially, this COP28 did not inspire hope. Set in a surreal venue, in a surreal mega desert city and led by an oil executive, cynicism was rife. Added to this, a leaked threatening letter from OPEC, and a civil society that held no climate demonstrations. Instead they came to the Green (public) Zone to watch amazing light shows and eat ice cream.

So much is at stake. At this COP, States had to adopt a final draft of the first ‘Global Stocktake’ (GST) since the Paris Agreement. This coincided with the massive [6th Assessment Report](https://www.ipcc.ch/assessment-report/ar6/) (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which advises governments on what is happening, why, and what we can do about it. Political strategies by fossil fuel extraction wealthy States to ‘normalize’ this main driver of global heating were played out at the IPCC and again at this COP. The current ‘fight’ is over who controls the narrative; fossil fuel wealthy countries are promoting reliance on high-risk geo-engineering methods like carbon capture storage, which in comparison to renewable energy systems is less effective, more expensive, less equitable, and not available at scale. Or solar radiation management, the Russian Roulette of geo-engineering.

QUNO was present throughout the COP28, and our publications, side events, press conferences and inter-faith work is summarized [here](https://quno.org/timeline/2023/12/intergenerational-justice-text-still-stake). We are also, to date, the only independent faith-based observer at the IPCC. In this process, we seek to protect the integrity of the science from States’ political inference at the IPCC report adoption processes.

In preparation for this COP28, we collated the IPCC Reports’ findings on urgent, effective, equitable and rights-based climate action, and created two toolkits - one for government officials and one for citizens. We translated them into Arabic and Spanish, and carried 40kg of printed copies to Dubai, and hand directly to negotiators. The move was poignant; the IPCC appeared sidelined at the COP28. The IPCC was not listed on the map. Tt shared a pavilion in one of the buildings furthest from negotiations and was set behind OPEC and a Gas Exporting Consortium Pavilion. This came across as a cruel joke; the QUNO toolkits turned out to be the only visible printed reference to IPCC findings in the negotiation buildings, and the only translation in Arabic available.

And yet this COP28 surprised. It recognized the existential need to transition away from the main driver of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions – fossil fuels. It included loopholes on geo-engineering and ‘transition fuels’ to pacify fossil fuel interests, but the silence is broken. COP28 decisions also called for countries ‘nationally determined contributions’ (NDCs) to integrate 1.5C temperature rise limit strategies. This COP operationalized the Funding Mechanism for Loss and Damage, with countries pledging some 800 million USD within 2 weeks, led by Emirates and Germany leading with 100 million USD each. Ten years ago, we were struggling for loss and damage to simply be recognized.

At this COP, the European Union, Latin American and African countries also blocked efforts to pass carbon trading frameworks, known as Article 6, because proposed compliance standards were too weak. That was a political win against dangerous greenwashing – dangerous because, as with reliance on carbon capture storage, carbon markets can result in ineffective climate action, in turn lost time and lives to avert catastrophic global heating.

There were also many COP28 disappointments. The Paris Agreement commits developed countries to lead on GHG emission reductions (mitigation) and climate finance for developing countries. But the Agreement cannot set specific country targets and both mitigation and finance remain far below developed country historical and ethical responsibility, and scientific advice. Historical cumulative net carbon dioxide emissions already account for about 4/5ths of the total carbon budget for a 50% probability of limiting global warming to 1.5 °C[[1]](#footnote-1). Yet the five fossil fuel wealthy developed countries – USA, UK, Norway, Canada and Australia – are increasing fossil fuel extraction beyond 1.5C safe levels. Countries NDCs count burning, not extraction. Inequitable wealth is protected.

For those of us working at the international level, we cannot stress enough how existential is the need for people to speak out and build political change. The COPs can signal global action, but these agreements are as strong or weak as our governments allow. Voting matters - Colombia’s new government challenged inaction in the room. Germany’s coalition drives a national energy transformation. An Australian Minister at COP28 state publicly that the fossil fuels era was over.

So please, print out a copy of the COP28 Global Stocktake, and send it to your political representative. Ask them to describe actions they are taking to build climate-resilient, sustainable and just communities in your region. Ask if your country’s NDC and is now in line with a 1.5C global temperature rise limit. Ask if your national adaptation plan promotes sustainable community resilience in energy, economy and agriculture. Ask if we are reducing fossil fuel extraction and burning, or just talking about expensive geo-engineering techniques that pump emissions in the ground and leave leakage and storage cost nightmares to our children. Ask if we are delivering our fair historical share of financial support, if we integrate ‘polluter pays’ approaches to ensure those most responsible are held accountable, and if we protect the most vulnerable in our society. Ask if we have progressive or regressive taxation, the former to fund climate action? Quote the scientific finding that “10% of households with the highest per capita emissions contribute 34–45% of global consumption-based household GHG emissions, while the bottom 50% contribute 13–15%.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Climate change is a spiritual crisis, and it is a wealth crisis.

Speak to the profound IPCC cry for help before we “*miss a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.*”[[3]](#footnote-3) Do not feed the silence.

1. COP28 Global Stocktake, p. 4, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cma2023_L17_adv.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6syr/pdf/IPCC_AR6_SYR_SPM.pdf> (page 5) (accessed May 23, 2023) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 IPCC, 2023: Sections. In: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, H. Lee and J. Romero (eds.)]. IPCC, Geneva, Switzerland, p. 89, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_SYR_FullVolume.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)