

COP28

The Road Ahead on

Climate Communications

2024

The world's gaze turned to climate and the United Arab Emirates for much of December, with more than 80,000 leaders, decision makers and influential figures from government, business, civil society and academia convening in Dubai for the United Nations Climate Conference - COP28.

After two weeks of fraught negotiation, and a multitude of climate announcements and commitments relating to energy, food, health, finance and more, the final days came down to intense debate on wording focused on the energy transition and the framing of our global approach to fossil fuels. Here, our team offers perspective on the COP, and the impact it could have for corporate and brand advocacy, plus sustainability and climate communications across the world.



WHAT

HAPPENED?

1 THE 'END OF THE FOSSIL FUEL ERA'?

COP28 ended with an agreement among almost 200 countries to commit to "transitioning away from fossil fuels," by accelerating the shift to renewables before 2030. Many countries had advocated for stronger language that would have called for a "phase out" or "phase down" of fossil fuels but faced a pushback from several oil and gas producing nations. Still, the deal marks the first time a UN climate agreement has called for governments to cut back on all fossil fuels.

The agreement also includes a call to triple global renewable energy capacity and double the rate of energy savings through efficiency measures by 2030, a crucial guidepost for staying on track to reach global climate goals. Supporters of the final agreement say the COP28 language pushing a transition in fossil fuel use will send a signal to markets and investors about the future of energy markets. Not all delegations were pleased with the text of the final agreement. Civil society representatives and climate activists, as well as delegations from small island developing countries, were unhappy with the outcome.

2 A REBALANCING OF GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

On the first day of the COP, countries signed off on creation of the Loss and Damage fund to help developing nations after climate disasters. The UAE, several European countries, Japan, China, Canada and the United States pledged a combined \$800 million to the new fund. Countries and activists welcomed the agreement, though the funding commitments made in Dubai are considerably less than what many countries say is needed. A geographically diverse board will be established, and the fund will be initially managed by the World Bank.

3 SLOWER PROGRESS THAN NEEDED SINCE PARIS

The first Global Stocktake (GST) is a sobering reminder of the urgency for climate action. The GST reported that the world is not on track to meet the goal of

limiting rising temperatures to 1.5°C, above pre-industrial levels. To stay within the 1.5°C warming target, global emissions need to be cut by 42% below 2010 levels by 2030 - current national commitments put the world on track for only a 14% reduction. The GST also warned of a "growing gap" between what developing countries need to finance their climate obligations and the funds they have secured to date.

4 MAJOR AGREEMENTS IN HEALTH, FOOD AND ON FINANCE

- **There were new commitments** of \$3.5 billion to replenish the Green Climate Fund and \$150 million for the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDC) and Special Climate Change Fund (SCCF).
- **There was an increase of \$9 billion** by the World Bank to finance climate -related projects in 2024 and 2025.
- **Nearly 120 countries** backed COP28 UAE Climate and Health Declaration to accelerate actions to protect people's health from growing climate impacts. Over 130 countries signed the COP28 UAE Declaration on Agriculture, Food, and Climate to support food security while combatting climate change.
- **A Global Cooling Pledge was endorsed** by 66 countries to reduce cooling related emissions by 68% from today.
- **Many nations signed** onto the 2021 Global Methane Pledge backing efforts to reduce methane emissions by 30% within this decade.
- **A 2030 deforestation goal** was included in the final agreement, upgrading the voluntary language of the Glasgow declaration on forests by 130 countries into a stronger commitment among 200 countries.

5 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Countries are required to update their national plans in 2025 to reduce emissions, detailing how much they will reduce carbon pollution by 2035. The massive financial commitments that are needed were left for next year and beyond. Planning will begin for COP29, to be held in Azerbaijan - another oil and gas producing nation. At COP29, governments must establish a new climate finance goal that reflects the scale and urgency of the climate challenge.

COP28

FIVE INSIGHTS FROM OUR TEAMS ON THE GROUND

Our colleagues in UAE share their observations on the big conversations coming out of Expo City Dubai.

1

COP28 PRESIDENCY CONTROVERSY

Ahead of COP28, there was controversy around its presidency and links to the fossil fuel industry. On the ground, this impacted media engagement both local and regional/international media, with risks of negative media for brands and businesses involved.

2

FOCUS ON EDUCATION AT COP

Education on climate topics, issues and innovations was a big theme at COP. The 13-day Greening Education Hub, hosted by the UAE Ministry of Education, was well received, with many high-level visits from heads of states and senior officials. It also drove heavy footfall (with more than 50,000 visitors compared to the expected 18,000).

3

EXPECTATION FROM ALL ATTENDEES TO TAKE A POSITION ON BIG OIL

There are more fossil fuel companies entering COP than ever before. While globally there is division on whether polluting industries can constructively contribute to COP negotiations, locally, there is a sentiment that these actors need to be part of any practical solution. Even brands outside of the energy industry (e.g., tech companies, banks) were pressed to have a position on this at COP28.

4

GREENWASHING SCRUTINY

The increasing role of consultants, lobbyists, and bankers at COP was highlighted in global and local media and generally criticized. Sensitivities around greenwashing were more prevalent than ever, with media seeing through shallow story pitches that lack substance. In some areas there were challenging reactions to brands who turned up to sell/showcase, versus those who arrived to contribute.

5

QUESTIONING THE VALUE OF PANELS AND MAJOR ANNOUNCEMENTS AT COP28

In addition to the formal conference agenda, large corporates and SMEs flew in from all over the world for their own mini-panels and presentations. In a highly competitive area, many of these presentations were to empty booths. Media, too, were highly unlikely to attend such activities, with many focusing their efforts and attentions on major global announcements and the Blue Zone negotiations. Even major announcements were often lost with the flood of news. In some instances, there was a feeling that some brands arrived only for visibility - a tough ask in such a contested space - rather than attending to incite change, progress or add value.

A GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOUR REGION?

Leaders from across our global network share their view on COP28.

APAC:

A DIVIDED REGION RIPE WITH INNOVATION IN ENERGY AND FINANCE

It was a busy COP28 for Asia. Singapore and Japan rolled out important initiatives to support efforts against climate change domestically and abroad. South Korea pushed for a 'carbon-free plan', and Indonesia announced the early retirement of a 660-megawatt coal plant seven years earlier than scheduled. Yet, the region that is home to 60% of the global population and two of the top global polluting countries still faces many obstacles to its clean energy transition, particularly when countries such as China, India and Indonesia fail to provide clear timelines for ending coal usage - the main source of power in the region.

The prize for the most significant highlight announcement during COP28 likely goes to the Monetary Authority of Singapore and the introduction of the World's First Multi-Sector Transition Taxonomy (Singapore-Asia Taxonomy). This is an industry-led mechanism with extensive sectorial coverage, which is set to clarify what constitutes sustainable and transition financing in recognition that a net zero economy in the region is taking place alongside critical economic development, population growth, and rising energy demands.

Marta Bigio, EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead, APAC

NORTH AMERICA:

A ROLE FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN THE ENERGY TRANSITION

The United States and Canada are among the top five oil producing countries and the outcomes of COP28 are unlikely to dramatically shift fiscal energy policy or energy sector priorities. Despite being nonbinding, the COP28 deal sends a powerful signal, however, and will boost focus on and support for renewable capacity and energy efficiency. This is especially meaningful for private sector companies that are overly reliant on fossil fuels in their value chains. Even though the language only applies to the energy sector, excluding sources such as agriculture and plastics - stakeholders in North America aren't likely to be so literal in their scrutiny and companies will be judged by how well they advance the fossil fuel phase-out.

Kate Olsen, EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead, NA

EMEA:

AMBITION FOR GLOBAL REGULATORY AND BUSINESS LEADERSHIP ON CLIMATE ISSUES

In the final days of COP, EU negotiators were among those pushing the COP presidency hard for the inclusion of strong fossil fuel 'phase out' wording. While those two words didn't make the final text, EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen reacted positively to the final agreement, saying that there is "powerful momentum to the transition away from fossil fuels." In February, the EU Commission will present its new climate plan to 2040, which will likely serve as a basis for furthering the regulatory pressure against fossil fuels during the next legislative term.

Moving into 2024, the EU - already leading on many aspects of policy and regulation in the climate space - will look to business to put words into action, with clear expectations from its Green Deal focusing on transparency (reporting), circularity (in packaging) and innovation. Many well-known European multinationals played a significant role at COP, with guiding hands and commitments in large scale, system-level commitments in agriculture, health and renewables in particular.

Graham Reid, SVP, Head of Sustainability, London


SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR CSOs

The race for transition starts now. The last-minute deal means companies at the forefront of addressing climate are ahead in ambition and can lead the rest.

COP28 shows how important it is to get everyone at the table to set a direction for ambition. Had it really been possible to get the defining "transition away from fossil fuels" without the oil nations present? Similarly, CSOs need to define their sustainability actions with stakeholders from across the entire value chain - spanning suppliers and customers.

The job for CSOs remains urgent, but the clearer mandate for action and the timeline from COP28 will help accelerate decisions and actions on sustainability. As sustainability strategies are developed, it is important to focus on what we progress towards more than what we transition away from.

Sofie Wikander, EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead, Stockholm



Are you looking to make sense of **the global climate** landscape in 2024?

Our global experts are supporting clients across sectors as they navigate a changing regulatory and stakeholder environment—mitigating risks and seizing opportunities to lead on sustainability solutions. Reach out to our team above for insights and intelligence on sustainability strategy, climate communications, stakeholder engagement and more, or send us a note at sustainability@webershandwick.com

CONTACT US

- **Paul Massey**
*President, Powell Tate;
Global Lead for Social Impact & Sustainability,
Weber Shandwick*
- **Kate Olsen**
*EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead,
NA*
- **Marta Bigio**
*EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead,
APAC*
- **Graham Reid**
*SVP, Head of Sustainability,
London*
- **Sofie Wikander**
*EVP, Social Impact & Sustainability Lead,
Stockholm*

*With appreciation to our contributing writers including Jim Meszaros,
Daniel Mercado and Maher Albash.*