

COP28 Dubai: The Other Side of the Story

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A two-member delegation of Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee—a member of Asian People’s Movement on Debt and Developed (APMDD) attended the 28th Conference of Parties (COP28) held in Expo City Dubai. The final agreement is termed by international media as a “historic accord on the transition away from fossil fuels.” However, the reality is far from it.

The announcement of "cutting emissions instead of a total phase-out fossil fuel" is a retreat from the achievements made earlier. It is a step back from COP27. This shift is attributed to COP28 being chaired by a person who was the head of the United Arab Emirates national oil company. Many movements and civil society organizations pointed out that, in terms of making progress towards decarbonization, we have actually gone backward. The language in the current text on fossil fuels is considered worse than what we had in the last two COPs.

While the last two COPs to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change committed to the “phasedown of unabated coal power and the phase out of insufficient fossil fuel subsidies.” The COP28 final text did not refer to a “phaseout” of fossil fuels. Instead, it listed 8 options that countries could use to cut emissions.

Another critical point is that developing countries, including Pakistan, which were at the forefront of advocating for the “phase-out of fossil fuels,” are themselves the largest fossil fuel consumers with the most extensive oil, gas, and coal expansion plans. An example is the expansion of coal-based power plants in Pakistan. With 21 thermal independent power producers, fossil fuels-based energy in Pakistan constitutes almost 60 percent of the total (32.3 percent gas-based, 12.8 percent coal-based, and 14.3 percent oil-based), and the government shows no plan to reduce it, instead promoting local coal-based power generation. This hypocrisy is mirrored in other developing countries demanding fossil fuel phase-out while pushing fossil fuel-based energy at the core of their national production.

COP28 also failed to pledge the amount necessary for the Loss and Damage Fund (LDF). Although the LDF was established, the pledge to make the full and complete Green Climate Fund amounted to a mere total of US\$ 725 million, falling short of the famous 2020 pledge of US\$ 100 billion. According to The Guardian, the pledged amount to the Loss and Damage Fund will cover less than 0.2 percent of the estimated \$387 billion per year needed to finance interventions to mitigate climate change. This was a total loss to developing countries, including those at the center of climate disasters like Pakistan.

The debate on Climate Finance has been the center point and center stage of this year’s COP28. The central tenet of Loss and Damage is that not everyone is equally responsible for or impacted by climate crises. Wealthy nations, historic polluters, should be required to provide finance for poorer climate-vulnerable nations like Pakistan on the front line of environmental breakdown. There was no mention of the US\$ 10.7 billion pledges from International Financial Institutions, donor agencies, and development partners for the rehabilitation, recovery, and reconstruction of the flood-affected areas at the Geneva International Conference on Climate Resilient Pakistan hosted by UN and

Pakistan on 23rd January 2023. The fact is that 90 percent of flood victims have not been rehabilitated despite a year and a half gone, inequalities are on the rise, and 20 million “new poor” are added.

The COP28 negotiations did not address the link between climate vulnerability and debt in developing countries, despite a projected global debt of \$97 trillion in 2023. A recent report shows 54 countries facing a debt crisis, with external debt payments by the Global South increasing by 150% since 2011. Pakistan’s external debt reached 128.1 USD bn in September 2023, rising by 29% in the fiscal year 2023. ActionAid International’s research reveals that 93% of the most climate-vulnerable nations, including Pakistan, are overwhelmed by debt. Instead of debt cancellation, international financial institutions increased pressure on Pakistan, leading to higher indirect taxes on ordinary citizens rather than taxing the rich.

The shining part of COP28 was the unity among civil society organizations demanding an immediate ceasefire in Palestine, no fossil fuels, debt cancellation, and no climate justice without human rights, gender rights, and indigenous rights. Daily, dozens of demonstrations inside the venue raised voices on these critical issues. COP28 administration allowed these demonstrations with many restrictions. No flags, no naming of countries, and no direct accusations. Despite that, Palestine was the center point of all the restricted demonstrations and rallies. There were huge cries for a ceasefire. The rally on 9th December was historic; Dubai, which has allowed no demonstration in its territories by anyone, has never seen thousands marching and demanding climate justice and a ceasefire. The UN-administered area of the COP28 venue saw hundreds of banners, chanting of slogans, and charged participants of this historic rally, which went around the venue till the gate of the Green Zone. Farooq Tariq, was one of the main speakers at the end of the rally with several others representing different constituencies. PKRC was able to raise strong voices on the burning issues such as Debt and Fossil Fuels.

On 10th December, on the international day of human rights, Farooq Tariq from Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee, raised the issue of migrant labor in Dubai and other Middle Eastern countries. “We demand equal human rights for all migrant workers, who are the backbone of the development in these areas; they are treated like second-rate citizens, no equal wages, no health and safety, no proper labor rights, and can never be local citizens.” He added.

Some of the civil society activists including PKRC were able to hold a unique demonstration at the press conference of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on 11th December. Eleven civil society activists held a banner “Hold The Line” inside the venue, attracting huge media attention. “Hold the Line” referred to not cross the 1.5 Celsius and urging UN chief to take strong position on that.

Another positive aspect was the initial attention of the commercial media to the demonstrations and press briefings of civil society activists holding banners and chanting slogans, something never seen in the territory of the UAE. By the end of COP28, the commercial media was silent about the daily demonstrations inside the venue; however, the purpose of world attention towards the fossil-free world was achieved.

It is now the time for total phase-out of fossil fuels—fast, fair and forever. The words “fossil fuels” in the text are meaningless if the rest of those pages are riddled with loopholes that not only enable but exacerbate the era of fossil fuels. Climate action is weakened if those who are most responsible are not held to account to lead by example. A phaseout is useless without the tools needed to actually achieve it. Climate action is pointless if it condemns billions to death and destruction.

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