

Op-ed

COP28: an historic outcome, but for whom?

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To make the COP28 outcome truly “historic”, we need to free the talks – and our political and economic systems – from the oily grip of the fossil fuel industry. This op-ed was first published in Euronews.

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COP28 was historic. To stand any chance of keeping global temperature rise below 1.5oc, the era of coal, oil and gas has to end.

In agreeing to “transition away from fossil fuels,” COP28 was the first time fossil fuels had been included in a UN climate change text.

However, a closer look at the text reveals a “litany of loopholes”, escape hatches that allow the industry to continue with business as usual while professing to fight a good fight. From their perspective: mission accomplished.

That should come as no surprise given their lobbyists flooded COP28, which itself was presided over by an oil executive.

Ensuring the deal is truly historic means we need to ensure climate policy isn’t co-opted by the fossil fuel industry. That means addressing the problem, root-and-branch, in Brussels as much as at the UN.



Fossil fuels take centre-stage

The process had been co-opted long before the opening ceremony in Dubai. The appointment of Al Jaber, CEO of Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc), as COP28 President was understandably met with outrage. It’s a glaring conflict of interest. But this was only a more blatant example of what has been the case for years: the fossil fuel industry in charge of the talks.

As week one began, the Kick Big Polluters Out coalition revealed that almost four times as many fossil fuel lobbyists were at COP28 compared to the previous year. The 2456 lobbyists outnumbered the combined delegations of the 10 most climate vulnerable nations.

The five oil and gas supermajors - BP, Shell, TotalEnergies, ExxonMobil and Chevron - together brought 65 lobbyists, with all except Chevron being led by their chief executive. Italian Eni and Norwegian Equinor also secured spots for their top execs, attending as part of very large lobby teams (24 and 14 staff respectively).

Norway's government had already publicly announced it was inviting Equinor to the talks, but more than 130 fossil fuel lobbyists were brought in by European governments and the EU Commission. This included the chief executives of Italian Eni, French TotalEnergies and Belgian gas transporter Fluxys.

"Do you really think Shell or Chevron or ExxonMobil are sending lobbyists to passively observe these talks?" Asked Alexia Leclercq from Start:Empowerment, a member of Kick Big Polluters Out.

The industry was there to rehabilitate its image as part of the solution. Key to this was the Oil and Gas Decarbonization Charter, championed by Al Jaber and signed by 50 industry executives.

They all pledged to reach net-zero by 2050 for their "operations," but not the emissions from their core product. That would hypothetically allow oil and gas production to increase, so long as the rigs were solar-powered.

Litany of oily loopholes

German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock heralded the COP28 outcome as the "end of the fossil fuels era." But negotiators from the small island states lambasted the "litany of loopholes" in the text.

So many that even the oil and gas majors welcomed the outcome. Loopholes include no definition of what a "transition away from fossil fuels" means, no timeline, and the text also recognises a role for "transitional fuels," industry speak for fossil gas.

UK climate minister, Graham Stuart, even told the BBC that new licences for oil and gas drilling in the North Sea were "absolutely a transition away from fossil fuels".

The text explicitly supports "low-emission technologies", name checking "carbon capture and utilisation and storage" (CCUS) and "low-carbon hydrogen" (aka hydrogen made from fossil gas with CCUS).

Both are dangerous distractions actively promoted by industry as a way to keep pumping oil and gas, shifting focus from leaving fossil fuels in the ground to reducing their emissions.

COP28 itself saw numerous voluntary initiatives around CCUS and "low-carbon hydrogen," readily backed by governments and fossil fuel executives.

Prevent the pyromaniacs from entering

To make the COP28 outcome truly "historic", we need to free the talks - and our political and

economic systems - from the oily grip of the fossil fuel industry. This particularly applies to the EU. New Climate Commissioner Wopke Hoekstra has ties to big polluters.

That's why the Kick Big Polluters Out campaign is fighting for a conflict of interest policy to protect the talks and our capitals from fossil fuel interference. We've done the same to the tobacco industry, creating a firewall to protect decision makers from the tobacco lobby. Now it's time for coal, oil and gas.

June 2024 will see negotiators reconvene in Bonn, Germany, in preparation for COP29. Conflicts of interest will be on the agenda. Expect a fight as the fossil fuel industry and the governments that support it will not go quietly into the night - at the UN and in our capitals.

Pascoe Sabido

P.S.

• CEO. 18.12.2023:

<https://corporateeurope.org/en/2023/12/cop28-historic-outcome-whom>