AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT | NATURE CONSERVATION CENTER

# WHAT TO EXPECT FROM COP 28: DEFINITIVE ACTIONS OR DÉJÀ VU PLEDGES?

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FEBRUARY 2024


AUB-NCC 2023 ROUNDTABLE SERIES - BRIEF #5

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*This discussion is the first of AUB-NCC's 2023 series of roundtables, titled*
**"Navigating Climate Change and environmental activism in the MENA region: Challenges and Opportunities".**
Roundtable discussion Organized on September 21st 2023 at the Asfari Institute Conference Hall in AUB.

The series is co-designed with:

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT | NATURE CONSERVATION CENTER | ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS | ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY & CITIZENSHIP | HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG BEIRUT Middle East | Arab Reform Initiative

**PANEL:**

**Lea Kai**
Climate Change Project Manager at UNDP/Lebanese Ministry of Environment

**Nadim Farajalla**
Director of the Climate Change and the Environment Program at the AUB Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (AUB-IFI)

**Camille Ammoun**
Policy Advisor and Political Economy Analyst and Associate Fellow at AUB-IFI

**George Ziadeh**
Youth Climate Activist and MENA Operations Coordinator at Leave it in the Ground Initiative (LINGO)

**Sarine Karajerjian**
Director of the Environmental Politics Program at the Arab Reform Initiative (Moderator)

**Opening Remarks from Tarek Al Khoury**
Regional Coordinator for Climate Action at UNEP West Asia Office

## BACKGROUND

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP) has been a pivotal platform for assessing progress and future developments in the fight against climate change. The COP reviews national communications of Parties and assesses their progress in achieving the ultimate objective of the Convention.

At COP 27, held in Egypt, the imperative of climate finance for Global South nations took center stage, emphasizing the need to finance climate change adaptation and mitigation. In the MENA region, climate finance has largely centered on a few substantial projects, primarily funded by loans, raising concerns about the power dynamics between funders and recipient nations and their alignment with local priorities.

## COP 27 LOSS AND DAMAGE FUND IN A NUTSHELL

As the climate crisis unfolds, negative consequences that arise from climate change will happen more frequently and severely. These risks include rising sea level, prolonged heat waves, ocean acidification, extreme weather events and species extinction.

Social protection, contingency finance, and risk insurance can provide a pay-out after disasters. However, a broader donor base and innovative finance tool such as the Loss and Damage Fund would be needed to compensate for developing countries.

This long-awaited ground-breaking decision was adopted at COP 27. However, the root causes of climate change must be tackled, and this relies on the significant reduction of emissions.

The effectiveness of the COP in driving sustainable solutions remains debatable. However, it remains a crucial forum for voicing and advocating for global climate concerns. COP has historically produced various decisions that, when laid out, showcase some progress and positive outcomes, even if they have yet to be fully and properly applied.

On the way to COP 28, one cannot but wonder if with the current "Global Boiling", ambitious pledges would be able to maintain global warming under the needed threshold. In the face of such uncertainty, recurring questions include: How will this Arab COP affect the region? How are climate narratives influenced by fossil fuel countries? To what extent are activists able to make their voice heard in a shrinking civic space?

## SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

The panel discussion delved deeper into the challenges and political strains faced by Global South countries concerning climate finance. Issues related to the distribution of climate finance in the MENA region were highlighted, particularly favoring mitigation over crucial adaptation needs. Concerns were also raised about the COP potentially transforming into a platform for greenwashing and to market patented technologies, thus sidelining genuine negotiations, and dismissing the issues faced by smaller nations like Lebanon.

Dr. Tarek Al Khoury initiated the discussion by pointing out the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to meet the Paris Agreement goals. He highlighted Lebanon's vulnerability to climate change and the importance of adaptation, a faster transition to renewable energy, and greater climate finance commitments. Dr. Al Khoury also emphasized the importance of engaging Lebanon in global strategic discussions to secure climate benefits.

Setting the floor for the panelists, the moderator Ms. Sarine Karajerjian began by showcasing the importance of Lebanese delegations in global climate forums like the COP. Ms. Karajerjian raised concerns regarding the COP being held in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) due to its economy being heavily reliant on tourism, air transport, and most significantly, fossil fuels. She also added that the distribution of climate finance in the MENA region has mainly focused on a few large-scale projects, which particularly favor mitigation over adaptation.

Building on the current political instability, Mr. Camille Ammoun reminded the audience of the reinforcing loops between conflict and climate change that also exacerbate each other. He specified that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries must navigate a shrinking fossil fuel market and adapt accordingly. Moreover, Mr. Ammoun raised concerns about some potential energy pathways, including biochemicals, nuclear, and geoengineering, as these can possibly act as a blocker in certain critical decisions concerning climate change.

On a positive note, Ms. Lea Kai underscored the essential role played by the Lebanese delegation in previous COPs. She expressed optimism about Lebanon's significant participation in this year's COP, marking it as the largest and most diverse delegation to date. Led by the Minister of the Environment, the delegation committed itself to understanding, learning, networking, and drawing inspiration from the various activities and initiatives presented at COP.

From an activist point of view, Mr. George Ziadeh noted the shrinking civic spaces in the MENA region where civil society's voices and concerns can rarely exist freely. Despite this challenge, this "Arab COP," serves as a platform for addressing pertinent matters specific to the Middle East. Mr. Ziadeh also pointed out that there has been significant cooperation among youth groups in the MENA region, contributing to the overall dynamism of the COP. By vocalizing their concerns and proposing actionable plans, they have been instrumental in ensuring that the COP reflects regional climate and societal issues.

From his end, Dr. Nadim Farajalla emphasized that the climate crisis has reached an irreversible stage, and that current pledges fall short of what is needed to effectively address it. Dr. Farajalla still recognized the substantial progress made from the Copenhagen Summit to the present day, but continued to stress that systemic change is indispensable, calling for all stakeholders, including oil and gas countries, to be part of the solution rather than the problem.

On another level, Dr. Farajalla criticized countries that misplace funds, especially when they invest large amounts of money to support war instead of climate action. He went on to explain how financing is complicated by a large number of receiving countries already in significant debt, which limits their capacity to receive investments for necessary climate actions. Yet, Dr. Farajalla underscored that investing in adaptation has a substantial net benefit, estimating a $4 return on a $1 investment by 2040.

In summary, the discussion fluctuated between pessimism and optimism towards COP 28, with recurring concerns on the greenwashing narratives, climate financing mechanisms and risky investments in nuclear energy.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### ADVOCACY AT THE CORE OF NEGOTIATIONS

The UNFCCC Conferences of Parties serve as platforms for activists to impact the negotiations and to shape the pledges. Delegates participating in these global discussions can facilitate access to financial climate benefits and fight for decisions that are fair and just for the environment and the most vulnerable communities. However, delegates must also channel their efforts by focusing on selected common points in order to better propose feasible action plans.

The diversity among COP delegates enriches the negotiations and ensures a reflection of the nuances of regional climate issues. The organization of regional coalitions around these nuances can elevate common challenges. These are especially important in light of the considerable shrinking of civic spaces across the MENA region.

### GREENING THE ECONOMIES OF FOSSIL FUEL NATIONS

Countries with economies that rely heavily on oil and gas must be recognized as being an integral part of the solution towards a greener economy. Current net-zero targets require a mix of new technologies to generate sustainable renewable energy, instead of relying solely on false solutions given the dangers they might hold. Countries depending on fossil fuels need to leverage science so policy makers can turn the greenwashing narratives into alternatives that are scientifically and ethically proven.

Hence, despite their significant role in fossil fuel production and trade, these countries must shift their industries and navigate towards a shrinking fossil fuel market. This requires the adoption of sound energy policies that prioritize reducing the demand for fossil fuel while simultaneously preparing the market for the integration of new technologies.

### REDIRECTING MISPLACED FUNDS

The allocation of climate finance for adaptation and mitigation must align with regional priorities. Historically, mitigation has long been disproportionately favored over the adaptation fund which calls for a reassessment of the financial priorities at the local and regional scale. These climate finance priorities need to be freed from any bias to ensure that the funds are allocated fairly without political influence.

Misplaced funds and concessional loans intensify exploitative power dynamics and exacerbate vulnerabilities in the concerned countries. Thus, many recipient countries are grappling with substantial debts, hindering their capacity to effectively utilize investments for climate action. These financial constraints hamper the ability of nations to adequately respond to climate challenges. Therefore, there is an urgent need to free climate finance from bias and geopolitical influence, especially in the Global South, as a milestone towards achieving climate justice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS & WAY FORWARD

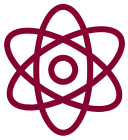
The roundtable provided an overview of the most pressing topics related to climate action in the UNFCCC COP, highlighting the central role of different stakeholders in this regard. The conversation between the panelists representing UN agencies, research institutes, policy makers and grassroots movements revealed the interconnectedness of climate change with geopolitical dynamics, notably in the distribution of climate finance in the Global South.

Considering the key messages highlighted from the panel discussion, the following steps can set the path for transformative actions towards a more climate just future:

### ENSURING ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF DELEGATES

National delegations need to actively participate in climate discussions by strategically focusing on key elements that could maximize the impact of their recommendations. This approach allows them to better guide national policies in line with the international climate agenda. Moreover, this ensures that the decisions are not imposed top-down, but rather result from the contributions of countries to the negotiations.

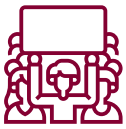
Moreover, delegates have a role to play in determining what is needed at the national level to implement the resulting COP decisions. A starting point could be calling for adaptive financial mechanisms instead of loans. This demand requires that countries first familiarize themselves with how to access and utilize climate funds effectively in order to ensure the proper and transparent implementation of those funds in manners that ensure maximum financial efficiency and trust from donor agencies and countries.



**ADVANCING THE ROLE OF SCIENCE**

Research is essential in producing policy briefs, research papers and executive summaries that guide policy makers. Scientific research should support countries in implementing their pledges by mainstreaming climate action into all sectors and pinpointing key areas to invest in.

Moreover, research on new technologies should provide a comprehensive understanding of their impact and the optimal combinations to secure the country's energy needs while causing the least harm for the generations to come. This approach should also direct decision makers to the right funds for climate action.



**REINFORCING COALITIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS**

Civil society actors must benefit from international platforms to express their activism. This includes raising awareness on a global level, opposing decisions, and lobbying for change through on the ground campaigns. Additionally, they have a role to play in naming and shaming countries that pledge and don't live up to their commitment.

It is important for activists to embrace small achievements, instead of expecting sudden major change. Moreover, they must build on incremented successes and ensure the continuity of previous demands. Concerted efforts are also needed to build networks and coalitions that strengthen the voices and power of civil societies.

**UNLOCKING ACCESS TO CLIMATE FUNDS**

Indebted countries must be provided with strategic support to invest in climate action, without hindering their resilience. These countries must advocate for the reduction of their debt service so they can start integrating climate action into their budget in an economically sustainable way. Allocating funds for climate action in priority areas is therefore crucial as it reduces the vulnerability and fragility of these countries.

Additionally, debt swaps for climate pledges must be considered as a viable strategy that can strengthen resilience. By freeing up fiscal resources, governments can integrate climate action in their national agenda without sacrificing spending on other development priorities. Debt forgiveness must also be considered on the global level as the amount of money owed in debt has reached unsustainable levels.

SCAN THE QR CODE **to watch the Panel Discussion:**

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Daou, A., Kallab, A., Mouawad, L.R., Mroue, C., Olleik, I., and Bitar, Y. (2024, February). What to Expect from COP 28: Definitive Actions or Déjà Vu Pledges?. A brief prepared by AUB-Nature Conservation Center and Arab Reform Initiative.