IMPATIENCE EARTH

Post-COP28 digest

Arab Foundations Forum

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Speaker

Dr. Lama Elhatow

Lama is a passionate environmentalist and an avid learner of the complexities of our ecosystem, and is often amazed at the interconnectedness of everything within it. Lama has a Bachelor's degree in Construction Engineering, a Master's degree in Environmental Engineering, and a Doctorate degree (Ph.D.) in sustainability and sustainable development from Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Lama has also been engaged in the UNFCCC climate change negotiations from 2009-2014 as a climate policy officer, and again in 2022, working with governments in the Arab region to reduce their GHG emissions whilst following both the mitigation and adaptation tracks with Climate Action Network-International (CAN-I).

Lama has 15+ years of work experience in the environmental field, 12 of which are as an Environmental and Social specialist at the International Finance Corporation. She has worked on a wide range of projects across the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Latin America region, with a focus on complex infrastructure projects such as hydropower development in Pakistan, as well as the Benban solar park in Aswan, Egypt. Lama currently works as a Professor and Program Coordinator at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC, in the Environmental Science and Policy and Energy, Policy and Climate departments.

Insights from our speaker

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

- We heard that The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is an international process, treaty and forum that was established in 1994, and has met annually since 1995 in COP meetings. 2023 was the 28th COP.
    - For a long time, many have argued that the UNFCCC process has become obsolete, as, despite meeting for almost 3 decades of COPs, the attending nations have yet to reduce global emissions and still have not agreed upon a collective course of action. The question has been raised whether the 28 COP meetings have made a difference in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.
    - There is also the argument that although many agreements and mechanisms are created at the COPs, there is still no way of holding countries accountable if they do not meet the targets set by the agreements.

- We heard that there have been several COPs that have been considered pivotal and brought about major agreements and mechanisms, such as COP 3 in 1997 which established the Kyoto Protocol, COP 15 in 2009 where the Copenhagen Accord was established and COP21 in 2015, which was where the Paris Agreement was signed.
    - The Paris Agreement was the first climate agreement which encompasses all countries in the world, including the United States. In the previous Kyoto Protocol, the US was not included in the agreement, even though the US, at the time, was the world's largest CO2 emitter.

- We heard that the UNFCC is a forum where every nation, from the likes of US and China to small island nations, has an equal single vote. This is one of the biggest distinctions of why the UNFCCC is such a pivotal forum for discussing climate politics. In many other forums, smaller countries, such as Tuvalu, often have less of a say than larger countries, despite being at higher risk of damage from climate disasters i.e. sea level rise. This equality makes COPs a pivotal space for discussing climate issues and reaching a global consensus.

- The airtime and how much political weight a country has depends on the political blocs that the country allies itself with. Many smaller countries have created alliances, which significantly increases their political power in COP meetings.
    - One example is of small island states, such as Fiji, Barbados and Mauritius, who individually have very little political influence. However, by collaborating, they have formed AOSIS - the Alliance Of Small Island States. By leveraging their voting power, they can obtain more speaking power and political influence at COP meetings, which are both extremely valuable because of the existential threat these island nations face as a result of climate change-induced sea level rises.

- We heard that there are many conferences discussing climate, such as the G20 Summit, which talks about fossil fuel subsidies; the International Monetary Fund and Major Economies Forum talks about the various transaction costs from climate change and the costs of transition; the Convention on Biological Diversity talks about biodiversity loss and the ecological damage from climate change; and the Sustainable Development Goals conferences talk about actions towards climate development. However, none of these have members from all the countries across the world.
- We heard that the previous UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, when it comes to climate ambitions, stated "let not perfect be the enemy of good". In this context, he means that as long as progress is being made towards a better climate future, then significant good is coming from the climate conferences.

The Paris Agreement

- We heard that the Paris Agreement was the treaty that introduced the threshold target of maintaining global temperature increases below 1.5ºC. This target was decided by a group of over 1000 scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and 1.5ºC was set because, above this point, the damage that would be done to the environment is irreversible.
- We heard that as part of the Paris Agreement, all countries have to research what they can realistically do to reduce their CO2 emissions and pledge this amount in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs). The UNFCCC then takes these NDC targets and calculates whether, if these targets are met, it would result in keeping below the 1.5ºC target.
- In 2021, all the NDC targets were calculated, and it was concluded that even if these were met, we would see a global increase of 2.9ºC, far off the 1.5ºC target.
- At COP 26 in 2021, all the countries were asked to revise their NDC pledges to keep the world below the 1.5ºC target. This was made difficult as the world was recovering from the economic aftermath of the Covid pandemic, and the Russian-Ukraine war, which put a halt on most countries feeding back any new NDCs. As Russia is a large supplier of natural gas, the war meant that many European nations had to find other sources of energy - which included countries using oil and coal, which they had previously sworn they would not use.
    - Out of the 200+ countries that needed to update their NDCs before 2022's COP27, only 8 updated within the time frame. This meant that in COP27, the IPCC was unable to give an accurate calculation on if they were on target to meet the 1.5ºC target.
    - For COP28 in 2023, all countries had sent revised NDC's in time for the Global Stocktake.
- We heard that the Paris Agreement also established that countries should pledge a collective $100billion in climate finance each year from then onwards. Since 2015, when that pledge was made, there has not been a single year when the $100billion goal has been met, with the closest being $70-80billion, meaning that developing nations are not being supported with the proper climate finance they need.

COP28 attendants and representation

- We heard that in COP28 in Dubai, there were two zones that were established: a green zone which was free for anybody to access, to allow for the participation of more stakeholders from the private sector, civil society, and indigenous groups; and a blue zone which was only accessible by people with a UNFCCC badge.
- We heard that the president of this year's COP was Al Jaber, who was the executive of ADNOC - the largest oil and gas company in the United Arab Emirates. This caused a lot of controversy, as many felt it was not appropriate for the CEO of a fossil fuel company to lead climate discussions, and also suggested that the personal agenda of the fossil fuel industry would be pushed at this COP.
- We heard that when preparing for COP28, it was expected that there would be 50,000 attendees. In the blue zone for COP28, there were 97,372 attendees - 2500 were fossil fuel representatives. There were a further 400,000 in the public green zone.
    - This makes COP28 by far the most attended COP that has ever been hosted. In comparison, COP27, which had been classed as the largest COP to date before COP28, had 50,000 delegates present.
- We heard that the objective of having so many attendees at COP28 was to ensure that all stakeholders, such as indigenous people, vulnerable communities and civil society are represented in some way at the forum. Instead, what it allowed for was a very large contingency of private sector individuals from companies like Chevron, and BP, as well as contingencies from fossil fuel lobbyists, which were able to advance a fossil fuel-focused agenda.
- The private sector has become more engaged in COP over the past few years, but COP28 had the most private sector representation by a significant margin. The reason for this could be attributed to the fact that this was held in an oil-producing country and had the CEO of a fossil fuel company as the President of COP.
- Whilst indigenous people, vulnerable communities and civil society representatives were present at COP, they were not as represented in numbers as the fossil fuel representatives.

The expectations of COP28

- We heard that there were five main expectations of COP28: The global stocktake, an update on climate finance, the development of a loss and damage fund, closing the gap on adaptation funding, and fostering a shift towards renewable energy.
- We heard that in regard to climate finance, one of the goals of COP28 was to address the fact that the $100 billion per year climate finance goal was not being met, to better understand how this can be met, and how climate finance can be applied to the developing world.
- We heard that in COP27, it was agreed that there should be a Loss & Damage fund, separate from any adaptation (how to help impacted countries and communities be more resilient to climate change) or mitigation (reducing emissions) funds. As the world warms, more natural disasters will occur that cannot be adapted to, and the Loss & Damage fund will be used to help compensate communities for irreversible damage and loss of their livelihood, cultures, land, property, and other quantifiable resources.

    - The original $100 billion climate finance per year was designed to be split equally between mitigation and adaptation funding, however in practice it was closer to 80% mitigation funding and 20% adaptation funding. The reason for this is that many of the funders are looking for a return on their investment, and mitigation funding, such as clean energy, tends to produce more potential for profit.
        - Because multilateral development banks (MDBs) tend to invest for profit, there has been a lot of discussion and debate around how these groups work in terms of climate financing. In particular, at COP28 there has been a lot of discussion around debt cancellation and debt swaps. Many countries are being given loans rather than climate grants. In some cases, natural disasters such as floods can destroy infrastructure built by these loans, yet the countries are still required to pay back the loan. There are some questions on if these debts should be cancelled, or if they should be covered by a Loss & Damage fund.
    - An example of a natural disaster that could not be adapted to was the 2022 Pakistan floods, which resulted in $300 billion of economic losses, including the destruction of towns, infrastructure, and lost livelihoods.
- We heard that before COP28, it was agreed that the World Bank would manage and house the Loss & Damage fund for an interim period of four years, until a more permanent decision would be made. One possibility that was suggested was moving the Loss & Damage fund to the Green Climate Fund, whilst others have stated they would prefer it as a standalone fund.
    - The World Bank has a mandate to decide which countries and states get priority for the Loss & Damage fund, and establish the criteria for these priorities over the next 6 months. The discussions about which nations get priority for this funding have been very controversial, with very little agreement from members of the discussion.
- We heard that one of the topics of discussion was to determine how to ensure more money from the $100 billion goes towards climate adaptation rather than mitigation.
- We heard that the final main topic to be discussed was the shift from fossil fuels towards renewable energy, with a specific focus on transitionary fuels such as natural gas, and the debate between phasing out and phasing down. Many groups, such as small island nations and civil society groups are focused on entirely phasing out fossil fuels, whilst large nations such as China and the USA, as well as many developing nations want to focus on phasing down fossil fuels rather than entirely removing them due to economic interests.
    - In regard to developing nations, they do not have the infrastructure needed to fully switch to green energy, and in some cases such as the Democratic Republic of Congo have very little energy infrastructure of any kind, and as such would need to rely on fossil fuels. This can mean that some nations that would be most impacted by climate change are still preferring to phase down fossil fuels rather than phasing out.
        - This also leads to ethical debates on if it is right to force nations to phase out if they do not have the infrastructure, or if only phasing down will allow nations such as the US to continue opening new oil and coal factories.

Outcomes of COP28

- We heard that typically at COP over the first two days, Heads of State join the panels and give long speeches about climate, but very little ends up happening. However, at COP28, by the end of the first day, the Loss & Damage fund had received pledges to equal $700 million from around the world, including from the United Arab Emirates, which is the first Global South country to pledge to a climate fund.
- Whilst it is impressive to see this much support on the first day, it's worth questioning whether this was 'one-time' funding, or if the money will be replenished. Additionally, $700 million is not a large amount in terms of loss and damage, as stated before, the Pakistan floods alone cost $300 billion in economic damage.
- We heard that in regard to the global stocktake, after assessing all the updated NDCs the IPCC agreed that we would still be heading towards a 2.8ºC warming world. This means that, once again, more revised NDCs are needed from countries in time for COP30 in Brazil.
    - One positive from the global stocktake was that the transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy has been included in the text of the treaty agreements for the first time since the UNFCCC was founded.
        - The use of the phrase "transitioning away" is weaker than "phasing down" or "phasing out", and has likely been chosen to satisfy requests from oil-producing countries such as the UAE. This has led to disagreement from many of the small island states and other countries calling for a phase-out. However, it is argued that this phrasing is what was needed for a consensus view.
        - The road to transition away from fossil fuels will be at risk from the start because yet again there is no agreement on how this energy transition will be funded and how historical polluters will take responsibility for this.
- There were several key outcomes from COP28. We heard that eight actions were agreed upon to attempt to bring the world below 1.5ºC warming. These actions are listed as follows:
    - Triple renewable energy capacity by the year 2030;
    - Rapidly phase down the unabated use of coal and restrict coal power energy generation;
    - Accelerate efforts globally towards net-zero emissions' energy systems and low carbon fuels by 2050;
    - Accelerate development in zero and low emissions technologies such as renewable energy, low carbon hydrogen production, carbon removal technologies, nuclear energy and carbon storage;
    - Reducing both consumption and production of fossil fuels to achieve net-zero by 2050;
    - Substantially reduce non-CO2 emissions such as methane by 2030;
    - Accelerate emissions reductions from road transport through means such as public transport infrastructure and low-carbon vehicles;
    - Phasing out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption and do not address energy poverty.
- We heard that one of the technologies that were discussed at COP28 is carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies, which take carbon out of the atmosphere and store it. These technologies are very controversial, as there is no scientific consensus that it has been shown to be safe or effective in any way, which is what makes the practice problematic.
    - Despite this, a lot of oil-producing countries are requesting for CSS to be used, so that they can continue to use polluting fossil fuels.

    - Many of these technologies have been seen as loopholes that allow countries and corporations to continue to profit from fossil fuels without having to reduce their usage of these fuels.
- We heard that another technology that was included and has proven to be problematic is the allowance of nuclear energy as low-emission technology. 22 countries led by the US, France and UK have set a global pledge to triple nuclear power by 2050. This is in contrast to countries such as Japan and Germany, who have chosen to phase out nuclear energy due to disasters such as Fukushima.
    - If the 22 countries in the nuclear power agreement triple their nuclear energy output, there are questions about the storage of nuclear waste. In many cases, nuclear waste is stored in developing regions such as Libya and Egypt. There are many questions about whether this storage strategy will continue and if so, how the risks of leakage will be managed.
- We heard that there was agreement in adaptation funding to develop a multi-hazard early warning system and infrastructure by the year 2030. Very little was agreed regarding the financing for adaptation, but the early warning system plan was established to ensure implementation for some adaptation work does occur.
- We heard that COP28 marks the first year that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has entered the climate discussions as a solution to help with data transparency. As AI is still in its infancy, many issues will need to be addressed, but there is a lot of potential for AI to be useful in climate discussions.
- We heard that many of the reactions to the outcomes, such as the thoughts of Al Gore and the Climate Action Network, feel that the resolutions from COP28 are filled with loopholes and half measures, are not large enough steps forward, and rely on unproven, unsafe technologies.
- We heard that the president of this year's COP, Al Jaber, has gone on record as continuing to invest in oil and gas production, despite coordinating a global deal to “transition away” from fossil fuels.
- We heard that COP29 will be held in Azerbaijan, which is another oil-producing country, and will likely be much smaller in scale. COP29 will focus on finance. It has the goal to establish a new climate finance target (to replace the annual $100billion commitment) reflecting the gravity and urgency of the challenge, as well as discussions on carbon markets and how to include them in COP’s mechanisms. COP29 is likely to be an uneventful or interim COP.
- We heard that COP30 in Brazil is looking to be a larger and more impactful COP, with another global stocktake.
- We heard that most COPs are not negative or positive, with some small successes being achieved in even uneventful COPs. The most meaningful climate action – including carbon pricing, climate finance, and regulations on emissions – will come from the national level rather than the international level.