

Climate Change at a Crossroads: COP28's Pivotal Decisions and Lebanon's Strategic Role

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About the author

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The 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) represents a critical juncture in the global climate change discourse. This policy brief centers on analyzing COP28's outcomes, with a keen emphasis on Lebanon's strategic participation.

Amid escalating global environmental challenges and a pressing need for decisive action, COP28 offered an unparalleled opportunity for world leaders to realign and intensify their climate strategies. In this global arena, Lebanon's role was not just participatory but strategically significant. The country, navigating its unique geographical and socio-political complexities, voiced pivotal concerns and contributed effectively to the collective global response.

This brief aims to unpack the critical events and decisions of COP28, highlight Lebanon's strategic involvement, and propose actionable recommendations for the Lebanese community to leverage this momentum while addressing the urgent climate and environmental issues facing both the nation and the wider world.

Background

The Conference of the Parties (COP) is an essential mechanism under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), established to combat climate change and its impacts. Since its inception in 1995, COP has convened annually, bringing together world leaders, climate experts, and activists to negotiate and update international environmental agreements.

COP28, held in Dubai from November 30 to December 13, 2023, was particularly significant, representing a critical stage in climate diplomacy. This conference, with 197 countries and the European Union (EU) participating, was tasked with evaluating progress since the Paris Agreement and setting more ambitious goals in line with the intensifying climate crisis.

The global context leading up to COP28 was marked by heightened environmental disasters, growing awareness of the climate emergency, and increasing pressure on political leaders to commit to more robust action. More specifically, the years leading up to this conference witnessed unprecedented climate-related disasters, underscoring the inadequacy of current measures in mitigating climate change. Nations globally grappled with the increasing frequency and severity of events like wildfires, hurricanes, and droughts, which highlighted the vulnerability of both developed and developing countries.

In 2022, the UN reported that over 56 million people faced hunger due to extreme weather, highlighting the severe human impact of climate change. The International Organization for Migration projected that by 2090, nearly a third of the global population might experience heatwaves, affecting over 2.8 billion people. The World Meteorological Organization noted a 50% increase in global average CO₂ levels over pre-industrial levels, a trend continuing into 2023. The UN Environment Program revealed at COP28 that about \$7 trillion, or 7% of global GDP, is spent annually on nature-harmful activities. UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized the devastating impact of the ongoing climate collapse. All these developments, among others, amplified calls for more aggressive and immediate action against climate change.

Lebanon, as a participant in COP28, faced its own unique environmental challenges, exacerbated by political and economic instability. The country's participation was not only vital for voicing national and regional issues, but also for integrating these into the broader global climate agenda. The prelude to COP28 for Lebanon involved preparing national strategies that align with its commitment to the Paris Agreement and addressing local environmental issues with global implications.

COP28 was a stage for countries like Lebanon to influence and be influenced by the evolving narrative of global climate policy, shaping the nature of international cooperation and commitment towards a sustainable future.

COP28 Overview

COP28 advanced the global climate agenda significantly. Key discussions centered on the urgent need to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, in line with the Paris Agreement. Viewed as the most critical COP since Paris, COP 28 saw near-universal agreement on a resolution to move away from fossil fuels, a major contributor to climate change. This consensus, part of the inaugural 'global stocktake,' is a comprehensive review aimed at hastening progress towards the Paris Agreement's goals. Nevertheless, the absence of a decisive call for fossil fuel elimination within this decade and concerns about 'loopholes' allowing ongoing fossil fuel usage left many countries dissatisfied.

The COP28 presidency achieved two significant early victories: establishing a fund for loss and damage compensation due to climate change and achieving consensus on the official conference agenda, thereby avoiding prolonged debate. At the same time, COP28 introduced a series of new global pledges, encompassing various areas from oil-and-gas company emissions to renewable energy, food systems, and integrated action on climate change and biodiversity loss. This section offers a summary analysis of the key outcomes in Dubai.

The global stocktake at COP28, an integral part of the Paris Agreement's 'ratchet mechanism,' was pivotal in reviewing progress against climate goals and shaping future national pledges (NDCs). It covered all aspects of the Agreement, including adaptation, finance, and loss and damage. Developing countries highlighted risks of unilateral measures and economic impacts of rapid fossil fuel phase-out.

The stocktake, crucial for future climate action, resulted in a call for reducing fossil fuel reliance, albeit without a full phase-out. It also advocated for significantly increasing renewable energy and energy efficiency by 2030. The final text, shaped by intense diplomacy, emphasized diverse national circumstances and the role of financial institutions in climate finance, urging ambitious emission reduction targets.

At COP28, key issues in adaptation finance and planning were debated. Very few developed countries opposed adaptation finance, leading to changes in the final text and delaying governance targets for monitoring adaptation progress to 2030. The Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) framework was introduced to guide nations in protecting against climate change, a priority for climate-vulnerable countries. However, adaptation remains underfunded, with developed countries' financial contributions falling significantly short of the needs in developing countries. Additionally, a two-year work program was initiated to establish future adaptation assessment indicators.

COP28 highlighted key challenges in climate finance, focusing on the global stocktake's role in enhancing access to climate finance and suggesting

innovative financing sources. There was a push for international finance system reform, including levies on high-emitting sectors. Discussions at the upcoming COP29 are expected to center on expanding the climate-finance donor base.

The G77 countries emphasized adaptation finance in the GGA framework, but developed countries were cautious about setting financial targets. Brazil's forest finance proposal and the insufficient investment in developing countries were notable points. The final stocktake text urged developed countries to report progress on adaptation finance, and the contentious nature of the loss-and-damage fund was acknowledged.

At COP28, the Sharm el-Sheikh Joint Work on Agriculture and Food Security (SSJW) aimed to integrate climate action into agriculture and food security, marking progress, but ending with a procedural text, signaling ongoing challenges. Key discussions included establishing SSJW as a formal work stream, setting up a coordination group, and planning workshops on various agriculture-related topics. The Emirates Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture was released, committing to integrating agriculture into national plans. However, the SSJW negotiations concluded with a procedural outcome, reflecting the need for continued discussion, particularly on implementation and coordination challenges.

Yet, a breakthrough was achieved in establishing a loss-and-damage fund, a longstanding demand of small-island states. The fund, launched on the first day, was a significant outcome of UAE's strategic groundwork. It received equal emphasis in the global stocktake and was operationalized with a 26-member board, predominantly from developing countries, housed in the World Bank. The UAE announced a \$30 billion climate solution fund, while China chose to support vulnerable countries through different channels. This fund marked a unique achievement in climate negotiations, setting a precedent for future discussions on fossil fuels and climate finance.

Negotiations on Article 6, which focuses on international carbon markets and cooperative approaches, faced challenges. Disagreements on key aspects of Articles 6.2 (country-to-country carbon trading) and 6.4 (centralized international carbon market) led to an impasse, with discussions postponed to the next year. The politicization of these discussions, scrutiny of the voluntary carbon market, and differing views on oversight and standards highlighted the complexities in aligning national interests for global climate action. The implementation of these articles remains uncertain, especially in sectors like agriculture, which require localized solutions.

Significant progress, however, was made in discussing socio-economic impacts of climate action, known as response measures. Originating from COP17, these measures have evolved to address issues like just transitions and economic diversification. Although COP28 saw complex debates, a clean text emerged,

signifying progress but also highlighting ongoing challenges and the need for future negotiations. The global stocktake under the Paris Agreement is set to incorporate the impacts of response measures, emphasizing their continued importance in balancing climate action with socio-economic considerations.

The Just Transition Work Program (JTWP) sparked debates over its scope, with developed countries focusing on labor transition and developing countries advocating for a broader approach. The G77 proposed a bridging proposal for the JTWP, leading to linguistic disagreements and concerns about diluting the focus on workers. The final text, influenced by International Labor Organization guidelines, retained references to 'just transitions' plural and included human rights considerations, but removed specific references to socially just approaches.

COP28 featured diverse activities beyond formal negotiations, reflecting the complexity of global climate concerns. Protests, including those supporting Palestinians, underscored activist concerns. Key scientific reports from the WMO predicted 2023 as potentially the warmest year on record. Advancements in blue hydrogen and international agreements on clean hydrogen certification were announced. Countries pledged to triple nuclear power generation, balancing climate benefits against safety and cost concerns. Initiatives for food security and anti-deforestation were highlighted, while discussions on climate-related trade measures, like the EU's carbon border tax, indicated the intersection of trade and environmental policy.

Lebanon's Participation in COP28

As Lebanon participated in COP28 in Dubai, it faced a familiar dilemma common to many smaller and less affluent nations. Despite contributing minimally to global carbon emissions, Lebanon is disproportionately affected by the consequences of climate change, grappling with issues like increasing public health risks, wildfires, drought, pests and diseases in croplands and forests, decreased snow cover, and seasonal water scarcity. This disparity raises a critical question: who bears the financial responsibility for addressing these impacts in countries like Lebanon?

This year's Lebanese delegation at COP28 was the largest to date. The delegation, numbering over 150, included ministers, administrators, and experts participating actively in the discussions in Dubai. However, Lebanon's participation in COP28 was not only significant due to the size of its delegation but also due to the depth and breadth of issues it addressed and the commitments it undertook.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati's focus at COP28 on strengthening Lebanon's national resilience, especially in conflict-affected areas, highlighted the country's proactive stance on addressing the combined challenges of climate

change and regional conflicts. By acknowledging these compounded risks, Lebanon positioned itself to develop robust strategies, utilizing COP28 outcomes on adaptation and resilience-building, to effectively manage the unique challenges it faces at the intersection of climate change and regional instability. The active role played by the Minister of Environment Nasser Yassin and his team revealed a multi-faceted approach to climate action, reflecting both the country's unique challenges and its dedication to global environmental issues.

Lebanon's decision to join the Climate & Clean Air Coalition, a UNEP initiative, reflected its commitment to simultaneously address air pollution and climate change. This is particularly pertinent given Lebanon's challenges with waste management and financial crises. Membership in the coalition offers Lebanon access to international expertise and best practices, especially in managing emissions from the waste sector. This strategic move is expected to aid in developing and implementing effective waste management strategies, thereby reducing air pollution and contributing to climate change mitigation.

The integration of health issues into the COP agenda, with a dedicated day for health-related discussions, marked a significant advancement. Lebanon's participation, invited by the World Health Organization, highlighted the importance of addressing the intersection of climate change and public health. Lebanon now faces the task of translating these discussions into actionable strategies and robust health policies resilient to climate impacts. This involvement also opens opportunities for Lebanon to seek international support in enhancing its healthcare infrastructure and services amid environmental challenges.

Lebanon highlighted 'ecocide' due to regional conflicts, focusing on environmental damage caused by the Israeli occupying army using incendiary bombs along the southern border. These claims, supported by the Lebanese Army and satellite imagery, underscored the impact of geopolitical tensions on the environment. Lebanon's emphasis on ecocide aimed to garner international support for environmental protection and legal redress for such damages. This approach aligns with international environmental law and sets a precedent for holding parties accountable for ecological harm.

The Lebanese Ministry of Environment condemned the bombing in south Lebanon, highlighting the severe impact on human life, property, and natural resources. Over 100 fires caused by Israeli phosphorus shelling burned more than 4.6 million square meters, including vital forest lands, agricultural fields, and culturally significant olive trees. This resulted in substantial economic and environmental damage, with direct losses estimated at around 12 million US dollars. This situation at COP28 emphasized the need for global action against environmental violations that exacerbate climate change and threaten community sustainability.

Recommendations for the Lebanese Community

The following recommendations aim to guide the Lebanese community at large in building a sustainable, resilient, and environmentally responsible future, leveraging the opportunities and insights gained from COP28:

- **Leverage COP28 outcomes:** Use the momentum and commitments made at COP28 to enhance national climate policies. This includes integrating COP28's global objectives into Lebanon's national climate action plan.
- **Strengthen environmental governance:** Support a robust governance structure to oversee and implement environmental policies effectively. This involves enhancing institutional capacities and establishing/enforcing clear regulatory frameworks.
- **Promote sustainable economic growth:** Align economic development strategies with environmental sustainability. Focus on green investments, renewable energy, and sustainable forest management and agriculture to create economic opportunities while preserving natural resources.
- **Ensure inclusivity and equity in transitioning to a green economy,** considering workforce and community needs.
- **Prioritize renewable energy and sustainable forest and agriculture projects** using the Global Climate Solutions Fund.
- **Enhance public-private partnerships:** Collaborate with private sector entities to fund and implement climate projects. Encourage investments in renewable energy, waste management, and other green initiatives.
- **Build climate resilience:** Invest in infrastructure and community resilience, particularly in areas prone to environmental risks. This includes developing adaptive capacities to deal with extreme weather events and climate-induced disasters.
- **Develop comprehensive, long-term resilience and adaptation programs** which can benefit from the Loss and Damage Fund.
- **Focus on education and awareness:** Implement comprehensive environmental education programs to raise awareness about climate change and sustainability. Engage communities in climate action initiatives to foster a culture of environmental stewardship.
- **Advance regional and international collaboration:** Strengthen ties with regional and international partners to share knowledge, resources, and best practices in climate action. Participate actively in global climate dialogues and initiatives.
- **Sustain collaboration with international bodies (e.g., the World Bank and the European Union)** for solid waste management and forest fire risk management, focusing on capacity building of local authorities and local community groups.

- **Monitor and evaluate progress:** Establish operational mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of climate policies. Use data-driven approaches to ensure accountability and continuous improvement in environmental management.

Conclusion

On one side, COP28 marked a significant milestone in the global climate agenda. The conference's outcomes, notably in emission reductions, adaptation finance, and the establishment of the loss and damage fund, signal a global commitment to more decisive climate action.

On the other side, Lebanon's active participation in COP28 has opened numerous avenues for the country to effectively address its pressing climate and environmental challenges. By leveraging the discussions and outcomes of COP28, Lebanon is well-positioned to enhance its environmental governance, attract green investments, and build resilience. Engaging in meaningful international partnerships will be key to navigating Lebanon's unique challenges. The commitments and actions demonstrated at the summit reflect a deep understanding of climate change as a complex, multifaceted issue, underscoring the need for integrated and comprehensive responses at both the national and global levels.

The country faces relentless climate impacts, political and socio-economic instability, an increasing number of refugees, and persistent economic and monetary crises, and seeks immediate tangible relief and support. In this context, the outcomes of COP28, especially in terms of financial support and international cooperation, will be critical in determining how Lebanon can navigate and mitigate its climate challenges.

As Lebanon navigates its complex socio-political landscape, the path forward requires a holistic approach to climate action, integrating global commitments with national priorities. The success of these endeavors will depend on effective implementation, international cooperation, and a commitment to a sustainable and resilient future. Accordingly, the recommendations outlined for the Lebanese community focus on leveraging COP28 outcomes, enhancing environmental governance, fostering sustainable economic growth, and building resilience.

LCPS

About the Policy Brief

A Policy Brief is a short piece regularly published by LCPS that analyzes key political, economic, and social issues and provides policy recommendations to a wide audience of decision makers and the public at large.

About LCPS

Founded in 1989, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is an independently managed, non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental think tank whose mission is to produce and advocate for policies that improve governance in Lebanon and the Arab region. LCPS's current research agenda focuses on: enhancing governance, informing the process of economic growth and sustainable development, promoting inclusive and effective social policies, and informing the development of policies for a sustainable environment. Four themes cut across the above areas of focus, including gender, youth, conflict resolution, and technology.

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