

Connor P. Mullin – MPA 2225 – Final Exam – What would it take for COP28 to be deemed a success?

Next year's COP28 in Dubai will be contentious for a number of reasons, and measuring success or failure will in part depend on how and what categories and issues are evaluated. The agenda will consist of two major points: finalizing the logistics of the agreed-upon but not yet implemented loss and damage fund from this year's COP27, and the presentation of the information from the 'global stocktake' of actions under the Paris Agreement. Additionally, the host country of the UAE will wish to portray themselves as positive for the climate despite being a major oil and natural gas exporter, which will be pushed back on heavily by climate activists. Nonetheless, the situation is such that, while the COP28 will likely accomplish some goals, it cannot plausibly be made an overall success, at least in the public's mind.

Given that COP28 is nearly a year in the future, the exact context in which it will take place is not yet known. However, three factors can be predicted. First, per the Global Carbon Project, global emissions will be higher in 2022 than in 2021, indicating that the temporary dip in emissions during the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic will have been erased in a rebound. Although this indicates emissions have not yet peaked, given that emissions growth rates appear to be flattening it is unclear whether we are globally nearing a peak in carbon emissions, and if so from what sectors. Secondly, as can be confirmed by anyone in the climate science community, climate-related impacts, including droughts, floods, and heatwaves, will likely be worse in 2023 than in previous years. Likewise, global average temperatures will likely be higher in 2023 than in 2022, though this is not guaranteed given interannual variation.

Finally, it is extremely unlikely that any of the wealthier nations of the world will implement more substantial climate change mitigation or adaptation policies, especially relating to transferring funds to vulnerable less-developed nations, in the next 11 months. Multiple reports from various observing bodies have repeatedly emphasized that insufficient amounts of money are being directed towards larger issues of adaptation, especially in terms of flow towards particularly-vulnerable nations in the Global South, and there is little reason to expect this to change substantially rapidly. These three points, combined with less-predictable factors such as questions relating to global geopolitics and conflict or energy prices, set the context for COP28 and help us to evaluate whether it will be a success or not.

As such, we can establish that COP28 is very likely to be viewed as a failure by the wider climate-conscious public and governments, even if in fact more progress may be made behind the scenes than expected, and that there is little that can plausibly be done to change this situation. As,

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surprisingly, several previous holdouts among Global North nations approved the loss-and-damage fund at COP27, it is likely that the logistical details surrounding it will be resolved at COP28 and it will be funded to an extent, rendering the COP a success from these countries' perspectives. However, given the noted low likelihood of motivation among the funding countries to provide additional economic resources, and their previous failures in this regard, it is improbable that it will be implemented to the extent necessary to satisfy the Global South nations that need it. As such, it will be viewed by their governments, and activists especially but not solely from those regions, as a failure.

The second point on COP28's agenda, the global stocktake, is also likely to be viewed as a failure by the public. Given the ongoing overall increase in global carbon emissions over the past five years, which cannot be retroactively changed, there is no way that coverage and opinions of the stocktake will be anything other than negative. This does not mean that efforts begun and implemented over the past five years have all been failures, but does mean that the globe has so far failed to meet the Paris Agreement goals. Such failures will be more obvious given the probability of severe climate-related disasters next year. This is also the case for goals relating to mitigation and adaptation, especially given the US's failure to provide its promised allotment of funding to assist Global South nations, although the loss and damage fund may assist to some extent. However, behind the scenes, the stocktake itself will be a success, as the process will have been carried out fully. Finally, the UAE acting as a host country will open the COP to likely-deserved criticism from activists and scientists, but as the host will not be changed at this time nothing can be done to prevent this failure.

Based on the above points, it is very unlikely COP28 will be publicly viewed as a success, and beyond ensuring the loss and damage fund is fully established there is little that can be done to genuinely make it one. If governments in the Global North took dramatic, and very implausible, action in earlier 2023 and committed larger amounts of aid to Global South nations, the COP could be viewed as more successful. However, by virtue of the nature of climate change, the stocktake will inevitably be viewed publicly as a failure because carbon emissions over the past five years have not truly flattened or decreased, even if the stocktake process itself will be an actual success. Finally, the UAE will almost certainly succeed in their goal of greenwashing themselves, which cannot be plausibly changed and will thus simultaneously be viewed as a failure by activists and observers.