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COP28 wrap | The battles SA won, and lost

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COP28 was held in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Beata Zawrzet/NurPhoto via Getty Images

The United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP28, came to an end – almost a day late.

Nearly 200 parties agreed to "transitioning away" from fossil fuels, a first for the UN negotiations.

For South Africa, the adoption of a Global Goal on Adaptation is a breakthrough – but gaps still remain on finance.

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In what has been dubbed the critical decade for climate action, South Africa has played an instrumental role in some of the key negotiations of this year's global climate conference, COP28.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP28, was hosted in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, for two weeks. It was scheduled to end on 12 December, but deliberations continued until nearly 200 parties reached an agreement nearly a day later.

The conference involved negotiations on the way forward for climate action – and reaching a consensus can be quite complicated.



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COP28 officially ended almost a day later than scheduled.


Sultan Al Jaber, [#COP28](#) president, had said he intended to close discussions by “11am at the latest” on Tuesday, December 12.


But seasoned COP-goers know they rarely finish on time.

COP28 ranks 13th in overrunning COPs.

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News24 takes a look at some of the changes South Africa was pushing for in the climate negotiations and whether or not they were successful.

Global Goal on Adaptation


South Africa and the African Group of Negotiators, of which it is part, were vying for a breakthrough in adaptation – these are measures to respond to climate impacts that are already occurring, such as droughts and floods that affect people's health, livelihoods and mortality.

The vehicle to enable this would be the adoption of a Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA). The GGA is based on the understanding that climate impacts are already happening and will get worse in future, so vulnerable communities need to be equipped to deal with these effects.


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The GGA sets targets for adaptation across several areas or themes, such as food, water, ecosystems and biodiversity, human settlements and infrastructure, health and livelihoods. Having specified targets will help cost the finance the countries need to protect vulnerable communities from climate impacts. Parties at COP28 reached a "landmark" decision to adopt the GGA after years of work.


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Rand - Aus dollar	12.47	+0.1%
Rand - Yen	0.13	+0.1%

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Company Snapshot

"South Africa welcomes the landmark decision to adopt a Global Goal on Adaptation here at the COP 28 at the Dubai Climate Change conference. This is something our country, together with the African continent and other vulnerable nations, have struggled to achieve for many years," the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and Environment (DFFE) said in a statement following the conclusion of the summit.

Forestry, Fisheries and Environment Minister Barbara Creecy described the adoption of the GGA as a "big step forward", saying:

"The decision recognises different theme areas for adaptation action, it has measurable targets that are time-bound. It also recognises the importance of securing adequate public finance for adaptation from developed countries.

"This is a big step forward."

The GGA sets out the targets that have to be reached by 2030

On water scarcity, it makes reference to "significantly reducing" climate-induced water scarcity, ensuring "climate-resilient" water supply and sanitation for "safe and affordable potable" water for all.

On food, it speaks to attaining "climate-resilient" agricultural production and supply, as well as distribution of food. It also calls for increasing sustainable farming practices and ensuring "equitable access" to "adequate" food and nutrition for all.

On health impacts, the text refers to promoting "climate-resilient" health services and "significantly reducing" morbidity and mortality linked to climate change – especially in most vulnerable communities.

On ecosystems and biodiversity, it aims to reduce climate impacts and increase the use of nature-based solutions. It calls for the "restoration and conservation and the protection" of water, mountain, marine and coastal ecosystems.

On infrastructure and human settlements – it speaks to "increasing resilience" to climate change impacts and to ensure "basic and continuous essential services for all".

On livelihoods, it speaks to "reducing the adverse effects of climate change" on poverty eradication and livelihoods as well as the use of social protection measures (linked to adaptation) for all.

It also aims to protect cultural heritage from climate-related risks and, preserve cultural practices and heritage sites and design climate-resilient infrastructure. It relies on making use of "traditional knowledge, Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and local knowledge systems" to achieve this goal.

While some have said the final text on the GGA uses "weak language", the fact that there are targets set for key sectors like food, water and health is a win.

"Before COP28, some observers thought that themed targets would not survive, and some countries fought hard against them. Now we have themed targets, but there is a lot more work still to be done to make them specific and actionable," said Dr Chris Trisos, chief research officer of the Climate Risk Lab at the University of Cape Town.

Trisos added that some of the ambitions had been "watered down" and that a lot of work needs to be done to track progress on the targets. Parties agreed to launch a two-year work programme to develop indicators that measure progress in achieving the GGA targets.

Outcome: Win

Global Stocktake

An important outcome of COP28 was the Global Stocktake.

The Global Stocktake is the first-ever assessment of countries' progress in meeting the goals of

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the Paris Agreement- notably limiting global temperature rise to 1.5⁰C above pre-industrial levels and achieving net-zero emissions by 2050.

The Global Stocktake would also make important recommendations for the world to meet these targets. Stemming from this Global Stocktake, countries will start the work of determining new commitments to reduce emissions or Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC).

The outcomes of the Global Stocktake discussions, which were facilitated by Creecy and Denmark's Dan Jørgensen, include an agreement to triple renewable energy capacity globally and double energy efficiency annually until 2030.

On the future of fossil fuels - a massive debate at COPs – parties agreed to transition away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a "just, orderly and equitable manner" and to "accelerate efforts" to phase down unabated coal power. Unabated refers to no efforts to reduce emissions from burning coal, oil or gas.

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South Africa's position was that a phase down or phase out of fossil fuels needs to be just, orderly and equitable. Creecy, in a statement, said that South Africa emphasised that equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities should "underpin all asks" on developing countries (CBDR-RC). The CBDR-RC principle means that developed countries responsible for the historical emissions that caused existing climate impacts, have to take the lead.

"In many cases, South Africa tried to build a bridge at COP28 on the Global Stocktake," noted Trisos.

This is the first time that countries have addressed fossil fuels with such strong language in climate talks.

"For the first time we have language which calls for transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner so as to achieve net zero by 2050 in keeping with the science," said Creecy.

Some loopholes still remain the Global Stocktake text – such as continuing to promote the use of fossil fuels in conjunction with technologies that remove emissions like carbon capture.

Outcome: Win

Climate finance

There are still finance gaps to support the transition away from fossil fuels.

"The COP28 leadership cannot claim they have saved 1.5°C. This deal is still heavy with loopholes, lacking timelines and fails to provide the support that the majority of the world's people are going to need to finance the rapid transition that is now required," said Linda Kalcher, executive director of thinktank Strategic Perspectives.

Other also pointed out that there is a lack of detail on the climate finance needed.

"...There is a gaping hole on climate finance to actually fund the transition from dirty to clean energy in developing countries. Without that, we risk the global shift being much slower," said Joab Okansa, senior climate advisor for UK-charity Christian Aid.

"This process may have delivered an agreement to move away from fossil fuels, but it's failed to deliver a plan to fund it. Finance is where the whole energy transition plan will stand or fall. We also need much more financial support to help vulnerable people in some of the poorest countries to adapt to the impacts of climate breakdown. Unless the finance is provided, developing countries will not be able to do it," said Mohamed Adow, founder of independent think tank Power Shift Africa.

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During the conference, new pledges were made to the Green Climate Fund which seeks to aid developing nations in their response to climate change. Pledges at the conference came to \$12.8 billion.

Generally the financial pledges are still short of the trillions needed to support developing countries transition to clean energy and implement their climate plans.

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The GGA text also noted the importance of finance, technology transfer and capacity-building for adaptation. It also acknowledges that, to date, the provision of climate finance for adaptation has been "insufficient to respond to worsening climate change impacts" in developing countries.

But it does not introduce new financial goals. It simply reiterates the COP26 aim of doubling adaptation finance from 2019 levels by 2025. This is still not enough adaptation finance required; Trisos described it as "woefully insufficient."

According to the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) **2023 Adaptation Gap report**, doubling adaptation finance would only reduce the finance gap between 5-10%.

Outcome: loss

Loss and damage fund

South Africa had welcomed the operationalisation of the Loss and Damage fund, which saw pledges of about \$400 million made in the first few hours of COP28. By the end of the conference, this had climbed to \$792 million.

The establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund benefited from South African expertise on the transitional committee that ironed out all the details of how it should work. The committee consisted of 24 experts and was co-chaired by South Africa's Richard Sherman and Finland's Outi Honkatukia.

"South Africa was very central to the process of establishing the fund in the last year," said Trisos.

READ | COP28 | Pledges for loss and damage roll in, but billions needed – SA chief negotiator

The DFFE previously said the projected economic cost of loss and damage by 2030 is estimated to be between \$290-580 billion in developing countries. This will escalate to trillions in coming decades. "By 2050, the economic cost for loss and damage in developing countries is estimated to be between \$1 trillion to \$1.8 trillion," the DFFE said.

Outcome: Win

Unilateral trade measures

Another battle South Africa took on was for the final COP28 agreement to address unilateral trade measures like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

President Cyril Ramaphosa and Creecy both spoke out against unilateral trade measures adopted by developed countries that would have devastating effects on developing economies.

The CBAM, for example, is an additional carbon tax on imports and would adversely affect South Africa's exports. Analysis by independent think tank Trade and Industrial Policy Strategies indicates that \$1.5 billion of South Africa's exports are at risk. South Africa's iron and steel sectors are most at risk.

South Africa and others raised concern that trade measures imposed by certain developed nations as a means to address climate change go against the principles of the Paris Agreement, such as the CBDR-RC.

READ | EU's carbon pricing on exports would be 'devastating' for SA – Creecy

"We are also pleased to see that the final text takes a stand against unilateral measures (such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism)," the DFFE said.

Ultimately, parties agreed that "unilateral measures should not constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination or a disguised restriction on international trade". It also called for parties to cooperate and support sustainable economic growth and development of all countries, which will enable them to better address climate change.

Outcome: Win

Just transitions

The DFFE noted that COP28 adopted a decision to implement a new work programme on just transition pathways. This was also co-facilitated by South Africa.

"The decision underscores the importance of finance, technology development and transfer and capacity building support to achieve just and equitable transitions, nationally and globally," the DFFE said.

The just transition text noted the importance of the "urgent delivery" of climate finance, capacity building and technology development and transfer to support transitions. It also noted the importance of improving international cooperation on just transitions in developing countries.

"This all-of-society and all-of-economy transition approach represents a progression and evolution in the international community's collective understanding of just transitions that in the past tended to focus narrowly on only the energy sector and related workforce issues," the DFFE said.

Outcome: Win

Going forward, parties at COP29 in Azerbaijan will have to determine a new climate finance goal – that is science-based and will address climate needs. So far the finance goal of \$100 billion per year between 2020 to 2025 has fallen short of requirements.

At COP30, in Brazil, countries will also table new climate commitments to reduce emissions.

This article was produced with support from MESHA and IDRC Eastern and Southern Africa office.


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