

# COP 28 Fails to Secure the Paris 1.5°C Goal

By Don Sutherland

COP 28 concluded last week. Despite claims that the conference was a breakthrough, it was not. That the conference recognized what the science and public had known for more than two decades—fossil fuels are largely responsible for ongoing climate change—is not a watershed development. It is little more than a long delayed acknowledgement that should have guided the annual conferences from the onset. The conference failed to achieve its chief mission, as there were no binding commitments, much less enforcement mechanisms, to secure the Paris goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C (2.7°F).

The language related to the transition away from fossil fuels, already qualified by, a ‘call’ on Parties, “to contribute”... “account...their different national circumstances, pathways, and approaches” is severely flawed. Worse, that language is accompanied by a Trojan Horse provision that declares that “transitional fuels can play a role in facilitating the energy transition while ensuring energy security.” “Transitional fuels” is widely understood to refer to a fossil fuel—natural gas.

A closer look at key language is in order:

**Adopted Language:** “Transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly, and equitable manner...”

## Issues:

- Limited to energy systems, not all areas e.g., transport, agriculture, etc.
- Transition is linked to three conditions that must be met: “just, orderly, and equitable manner.”
- No specific targets.

Objections that any one of the three conditions (“just, orderly, and equitable manner” can’t be met will provide excuses for not pursuing the transition. For example, oil and gas producers will almost certainly argue that the 43% reduction in fossil fuel production/consumption needed by 2030 to put the world on a path toward limiting warming to 1.5°C (2.7°F) will not be “orderly.” Hence, they will rationalize continuing a high production/consumption approach. Worse, they will do so claiming that they are honoring the “orderly” approach endorsed by COP 28.

The language should have been far stronger and more specific. Here's an example of what stronger language might have looked like.

**Stronger Language:** “Transitioning away from fossil fuels consistent with achieving net zero emissions by 2050, including a 43% reduction in fossil fuel consumption and production by 2030, keeping in mind principles of a just, orderly, and equitable transition.”

## Benefits:

- The end goal would be clear even without the more beneficial and desirable language of phasing out fossil fuels altogether.
- There would be specificity concerning the near-term and end goals.
- The transition would be the controlling factor and it would not be conditioned on other variables.
- The principles of a “just, orderly, and equitable transition” would inform how the transition takes place, not whether it takes place.

COP 28 placed renewed faith in weak voluntary commitments that lack credibility. Its language is essentially an expressed hope for a miracle to relieve the world’s leaders of responsibility for making the necessary difficult choices to effectively address climate change. Miracles are built from effort. There is no escape or exemption from the laws of physics.

Policy is built. Sound policy requires courage, capacity, and insight from leaders. Such attributes are not unknown. There are past examples of leadership guided by such attributes.

In 1987, the Montreal Protocol was adopted and two years later it was ratified. Following its ratification, a COP process similar to what is ongoing regarding climate change was established. COP 1 set ground rules for how to proceed. During COP 2 in 1990, the parties announced that they "declare... their firm determination to take all appropriate measures to phase out the production and consumption of all fully halogenated chlorofluorocarbons controlled by the Montreal Protocol... as soon as possible but not later than 1997."

There were no fudge factors. There was no ambiguity. There was no weak "call" that could easily be ignored. There was a firm declaration with a specific near-term date. Those leaders saw properly saw Ozone destruction as a crisis and responded with the boldness and firmness required to overcome a crisis. COP 4 in 1992 went on to adopt enforcement mechanisms. The leaders understood the paramount importance of compliance in a situation with extremely high stakes.

COP 1 on climate change was held in 1995. Nearly three squandered decades later, COP 28’s representatives still could not muster the leadership required to declare that fossil fuels would be phased out, or more specifically the burning of fossil fuels would be phased out. Their weak actions suggested that they continue to view climate change as something more than an inconvenience, but far short of a crisis that requires decisive action.

But what about the explicit language to “transition” from fossil fuels? It lacks credibility. Just days after the Conference concluded, its President Sultan Al Jaber, who heads the UAE national oil and gas company Adnoc, reaffirmed continued investment in the expansion of fossil fuels. In doing so, he rationalized that the world will continue to “need the lowest-carbon barrels at the lowest cost.” That oil is not a low carbon source of energy was not mentioned.

Al Jaber articulated how fossil fuel executives and their companies view COP 28. As he presided over the conference, his interpretation is the definitive one. Fossil fuel executives see COP 28 as permitting continued expansion of fossil fuel production capacity. They envision a world that will continue to rely on fossil fuels long into the future.

That's no "transition." That's business-as-usual. A business-as-usual approach is projected to lead to approximately 2.9°C (5.2°F) warming by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

COP 28 ensured that global heating will continue to proceed. As the world grows warmer, extreme outcomes ranging from severe drought to intense rainfall events will increase in frequency and magnitude in non-linear fashion. Society will deepen its commitment to increased sea-level rise from the melting of Greenland's and western Antarctica's ice sheets with profound long-term implications for coastal regions, including the world's great coastal megalopolises. Biodiversity will be further undermined.

Tragically, future generations who bear no responsibility for the problem, along with today's youth who seek to address it, will be the victims of this latest example of leadership failure. Virtually all of the leaders who refused to commit to phasing out fossil fuels won't ever experience the outcomes of their shortsighted and selfish decision, as they will have departed long before climate change's worst impacts descend on the world, its ecosystems, and humanity.

COP 28 ratified the continued use of fossil fuels. That was no breakthrough. That was a devastating setback with grim future consequences.