Arab Reform Initiative

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# The COP27: What's at stake for activists, climate finance, and loss and damage?

→ Arab Reform Initiative




A woman is on her phone in front of the monument with the COP27 emblem on it is seen at the 27th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change (UNFCCC), Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, 7 November 2022 ©Mohamed Abdel Hamid/Anadolu Agency

# Introduction

The UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP) is the decision-making body of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) tasked with negotiating and assessing international regulations on reducing anthropogenic climate change, as stipulated in the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.[1] Each year, a COP is organized in a different country where diplomats, politiciansactivists and journalists from all over the world decide the best course of action to reduce and control the causes and effects of climate change.

The first COP to be organised in the Middle East was in 2001 when delegates gathered in Marrakesh, Morocco, for the COP7, where they agreed on adopting further regulations on the global carbon market.[2] More than 10 years later, the COP reconvened in the Middle East in 2012 when Qatar hosted COP18, where delegates agreed to extend the Kyoto protocol until 2020. However, it was criticised as a "conference of low ambitions" due to its adoption of pledges that were considered by many analysts as disappointing.[3] On the other hand, one of its main achievements was progress on the notion of loss and damage, the idea that some particularly vulnerable countries could seek special financial assistance when faced with a climate emergency.[4]

The debates on climate pledges continued until COP21 in 2015, which resulted in The Paris Agreement. The agreement demanded a collective effort to restrict global warming by 2 degrees Celsius, and ideally by 1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030, something that would require a 50% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and reaching net zero emissions by 2050. [5] While the latter target will not prevent extreme weather events, the rise of sea levels, droughts and desertification, it is nevertheless considered the threshold at which the impact associated with climate change will become increasingly destructive and difficult to manage.[6] Furthermore, scientists estimate that settling with the 2-degree restriction, instead of the 1.5 degrees one, would expose an additional 420 million people to destructive heat waves, and widespread crop failure in vulnerable areas such as Africa or the Middle East.[7]

To achieve these objectives, countries submit to the UNFCC Nationally Determined Contributions (hereafter referred to as NDCs) in which they lay out their plans to reduce and mitigate their greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to the effects of climate change. NDCs vary widely between countries depending on their carbon impact, their vulnerability to climate change and their willingness to tackle pressing issues. The COP26 in Glasgow reiterated the importance of staying under the 1.5 degrees threshold with countries reaffirming their pledges and agreeing to submit new and more ambitious NDCs, and for the first time, there was a landmark agreement on phasing out fossil fuels subsidies.[8] Donor countries also promised to increase their pledges. For example, the USA sought to double current pledges to an estimated $11.4 billion per year by 2024, which would include 3 billion dedicated to helping with adaptation.[9] The UK has also said that it intended on doubling its climate finance pledges to $11.6 billion between 2020 and 2025.[10]

This year's COP has returned to the Middle East, with Egypt hosting COP27 in Sharm el Sheikh between 6 and 18 November. The stakes are very clear; multiple countries have either yet to submit new NDCs or submitted less ambitious ones. According to UN scientists not only are we dangerously close to already crossing the 1.5 degrees threshold,[11] but we could also be on track to witness a disastrous 2.8-degree rise in temperatures by the end of the century.[12]

The Middle East and Africa would be amongst the most affected parts of the world, which makes the COP27 in Egypt of paramount importance to push for maintaining the 1.5-degree limit, and for making a renewed case for developed countries to offer more climate financing and to commit to adopting loss and damage mechanisms. However, climate activists, a long-time essential part of COP negotiations, have rung the alarm over Egypt's human rights record, fearing that this COP is not a safe place for environmental and human rights activists to openly discuss their positions.

This paper reviews the challenges around COP27 and examines What is at stake for the African and Arab World and the challenges surrounding the issues of climate finance and loss and damage, especially with regard to the Paris Agreement's objectives? It also presents several recommendations on how these challenges could be rethought.

# What's at Stake for African and Arab Countries?

For Egypt, COP27 is an opportunity for Arab and African countries to advance their demands and strategies, particularly with regard to climate finance.[13] Despite being extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change (for example, an estimated 700 million Africans might be displaced due to droughts by 2030[14] ) and losing 5% to 15% of its per annum capita economic growth due to its effects, Africa's demands have long been neglected in international climate negotiations and in climate finance distribution.[15] For multiple reasons, including investor's lack of interest in Africa's development, out of the billions that have been given as climate finance, only 5.5% of global climate finance pledges have been allocated to Africa,[16] while its needs are estimated between 1.3 and 1.6 trillion USD from 2020 to 2030 if it is to reach its development goals and fulfill its NDCs.[17] Hence, Egypt intends to use its unique geographic position, diplomatic weight, and good ties with the West to facilitate the obtention and guarantee of climate finance for African countries.[18] Additionally, Egypt wants to promote collaboration between the countries of the Global South and become one of their leading voices.[19] To highlight this COP's emphasis on Africa, the Egyptian government held the Second Edition of the Egypt International Cooperation Forum in its New Administrative Capital in September 2022, during which it invited participants from all over Africa to formulate a shared strategy for COP27.[20] The Forum emphasized the importance of increasing blended and concessional finances as well as grants to developing countries and declared "the need to avoid approaches that encourage abrupt disinvestments from fossil fuels, as this will ... threaten Africa's development."[21]

In the Middle East, a lack of global action could render the entire region uninhabitable as temperatures could increase by 5 degrees by the end of the century.[22] Even in the shorter term, the future looks dire, as the entire region is currently witnessing record-high temperatures, rampant desertification and increasingly frequent sandstorms. In some countries like Lebanon, Syria and Iran, the already volatile political and social order is further threatened by the state's inability to help its population weather an increasingly hostile climate,[23] and the

effects of global warming are set to increase sky-high tensions between rival countries, such as Syria and Türkye who's competition for control over the Euphrates river will likely be exacerbated by increasingly common droughts.[24] It is in this context that Arab countries have sought to make their voice and concerns heard during COP negotiations. Twenty-two Arab countries have united in a block with Saudi Arabia as its lead negotiator. They have historically supported efforts to improve adaptation and mitigation efforts and favored grants to loans in climate financing,[25] and during the COP27 Saudi Arabia pledged 2.5 billion dollars to a Middle East Green initiative that seeks to reduce regional carbon emissions by 60% in the coming years.[26]

Additionally, every Arab country, except Yemen and Libya which are not parties to the Paris Agreement,[27] have adopted NDCs. For example, the Saudi 2030 Vision envisions that 50% of its energy production by 2030 will be made from renewable sources, including solar and wind energy.[28] However, rampant corruption and never-ending political and economic crisis have thrown a shadow over the feasibility of those climate plans[29] in MENA, and multiple Middle Eastern countries have economies that rely partially or fully on polluting natural resources. Some countries, such as Lebanon and Tunisia even see natural gas exploitation as a solution to their ailing economies.[30] Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Arab block, has also a history of blocking climate action,[31] and during the COP26, the BBC alleged that Saudi Arabia together with Australia and China pushed for a slowdown of the transition away from fossil fuels.[32]

Both Arab and African countries have placed high hopes on COP27 as an opportunity to make a case for renewed assistance in dealing with climate change as a way to confront the looming environmental threats. It remains to be seen how this will unfold during the conference negotiations, as African and Arab countries remained consumed by competing interests. While rich oil and gas-producing countries seek the prestige of being labelled leaders in sustainable development,[33] they so far remain reliant on fossil fuels and plan on maintaining production as per the global market's demands, casting doubts on their commitment to the Paris Agreement.[34]

## What's at stake for environmental

## activists?

Activists are central actors in COP negotiations. They represent popular voices that do not always find adequate representation within governments. Activists from the Global South in particular play an important role as they represent the peoples who will have the most to lose if climate pledges are not honoured.[35] They can give a human face and voice to millions whose fate relies on the outcomes of the negotiations.

There are concerns that activists will not be able to fulfil their role in this COP because of the shrinking civic space in Egypt. Multiple human rights activists have been imprisoned over the years, often without due process,[36] and the case Egyptian British human rights activist political prisoner Alaa Abdel Fattah has caught worldwide attention, especially as he recently entered his thirst strike.[37] In the lead-up to COP27, activists were being arrested and detained by the Egyptian police for peaceful disobedience,[38] and international human rights organizations have reported that multiple Egyptian NGOs have been denied access to the COP27 by the government, suggesting that Egypt is seeking to side-line those that have criticized its policies.[39] Only 35 environmental NGOs that had already worked and collaborated with the government on other projects were granted permission to attend.[40] Activists have also stated that they have faced difficulties securing visas to enter Egypt or finding affordable accommodation in expensive Sharm el Sheikh.[41] This has led to concerns that the Egyptian government is seeking to tightly control the narrative around COP27 and to prevent talk about its human rights and environmental record to overshadow the event.[42]

In an interview with The Associated Press, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry denied these allegations and said that there would be "a facility adjacent to the conference centre" where activists would be able to meet and congregate separately from the main venue. In addition, participants will be granted "access, on one day of the negotiations, to the negotiating h[all] itself."[43] In the words of researcher Hafsa Halawa *"Egypt wants diplomatic recognition and part of that has been opening their arms in a limited capacity to civil society advocates because what Egypt is doing is selling itself as a government that is a forward-thinking green actor"*. However, the activist granted access to the COP are in effect a regulated

opposition, unable to question the very fundamentals of the country's environmental policy. Hence this COP is witnessing the stifling of those who would have been the voice of a population at the receiving end of the worst of the climate crisis and it is uncertain if this COP will be able to entertain the demands and challenges of those it is seeking to save. Without adequate and free participation from activists, this COP runs the risk of not properly tackling the lived experience of millions across the globe, thus ensuring that negotiations remain solely focussed on abstract topics, not on material realities.

## The Climate Finance Trap

One of the stated objectives of COP27 is to strengthen climate finance mechanisms, improve access to adaptation and mitigation measures, and hopefully surpass last year's pledges.[44] By 2020, around 83 billion dollars were globally assembled as climate finance,[45] and by 2022 an estimated 96 billion dollars a year were pledged by governments, multinational corporations and private lenders, and this could cross the 100 billion dollar milestone in 2023.[46] However, this milestone was supposed to have been reached by 2020, leading many to say that donors are lagging in delivering on their pledges.[47] A broader look at the current situation does show that climate finance pledges have steadily increased in the past decade, with a 56% increase from 52 billion USD in 2013 to 83 billion in 2020.[48] However, this momentum should be preserved to reach the pledge of 1 trillion dollars a year by 2030. Nonetheless, for climate change to remain under 1.5 degrees, an estimated 1.6-3.8 trillion must be given as climate finance, meaning that current pledges are largely insufficient,[49] and governments in developed countries are facing significant domestic challenges to raise funds.[50]

Behind lofty pledges hides a complicated reality regarding climate financing. For example, on a global scale, the majority of climate finance has been distributed to support mitigation projects, which leaves very little for adaptation projects. Between 2000 and 2019 it was estimated that 65% of all climate finance was distributed to support mitigation projects,[51] which are often considered to be much more lucrative investments. Additionally, most adaptation finance went to developing countries, whereas most mitigation finance was given to middle-income countries, as they tend to be more financially hospitable and business-

friendly.[52] On top of that lies the issue of climate finance given as loans instead of grants. In the words of climate advocate Maymoona Abu-Omair "*The trend towards loans is very problematic because loans need to be repaid with interest and because they tend to be provided for projects that can demonstrate a return on investment so they are less likely to be obtained for projects you designed to help countries become more resilient*".

Accurate figures on climate finance are very hard to estimate. Oxfam estimated that in 2018 about 75-80% of all climate finance was given as loans. Another study done by a group of Swiss researchers estimates that up to 2019, 82% of the money was given as grants for adaptation finance while mitigation finance was split with 54% for loans and 44% for grants.[53] This discrepancy is because climate finance statistics are largely self-reported, meaning that countries take it upon themselves to report how much they've contributed, using their own metrics and definitions of what could be considered climate finance.[54] Loans, with their occasionally high-interest rates are a source of financial stress for countries that are already struggling with inflated debt.[55] Hence, climate finance has become a contested subject, as it increasingly resembles a vague umbrella term in which poorly defined investments related to the environment are lumped. Oxfam estimated that in 2017 and 2018, while around 60 billion USD were reportedly given as climate finance, the true value might be as low as $19-22.5 billion per year once loans and interests were paid, and when financial investments that were wrongfully qualified as climate finance were stripped out.[56] Indeed, studies by Oxfam have shown that investments that don't have mitigation or adaptation efforts as their main objectives have been deceitfully labeled as climate finance and compiled as fulfilling's a country's climate finance pledge.[57]

# A Breakthrough on Loss and Damage?

Closely tied to the climate finance debate are the perennial issues of loss and damage, usually defined as the impact of climate change and environmental degradation that cannot be avoided or softened by adaptation or mitigation measures, and hence goes beyond the scope of the "usual" mechanisms of climate finance.[58] For example, climate change is leading towards a rise in sea levels that threatens millions in countries that would be unable to have a globally noticeable

impact on climate change. In other words, the debate on loss and damage can be interpreted as a search to find the optimal ways to compensate countries that suffer disproportionally from a destructive phenomenon they themselves have little to no control over. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, it is estimated that at least 3.3-3.6 billion humans (almost half of the world's population) live in climate-vulnerable areas, most of which are in the developing world.[59] Within areas with nominally low climate vulnerability live large, disenfranchised communities that are also acutely vulnerable to climate change. Multiple estimates have tried to quantify the required cost of loss and damage incurred as a result of environmental catastrophes, with one account in 2015 saying 400 billion dollars by 2030, which will then rise to 1–2 trillion dollars by 2050.[60] Others have given figures that range from 20–580 billion dollars in 2030, to 1.1–1.7 trillion dollars in 2050.[61] As the world's ability to honour its climate pledges further erodes, the demand for loss and damage finance will likely increase exponentially in the coming decades.[62]

In 2013, after years of debate, the UNFCCC agreed during COP19 to establish the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage (WIM) whose mandate consists of fostering dialogue and assisting and advising vulnerable countries.[63] Financial support was also included within its mandate. The next milestone was in 2015 during the COP21, as the resulting Paris Agreement stipulated that "Parties recognize the importance of averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damage associated with the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events and slow onset events, and the role of sustainable development in reducing the risk of loss and damage."[64] However, developed countries were reluctant to agree on a framework for liability and compensation, considering that doing so could create a legal basis for litigation and lawsuits against them.[65] During COP26, the issue of loss and damage received a considerably large amount of attention, culminating in the creation of the Glasgow Dialogue on Loss and Damage as a space where discussions could be held on how to minimise the effects of loss and damage.[66] However, the demand pushed by several developing countries to establish a special climate fund and a facility dedicated to loss and damage was rejected, as they argued that existing mechanisms were already sufficient.[67] COP27 was widely expected to revive this debate, especially in light of the recent floods that have ravaged Pakistan, a country that produces less than 1% of greenhouse

gas emissions,[68] and on 6 November, loss and damage was officially added to the COP agenda.[69] Multiple countries, including China, are expected to join forces to pressure the developed world into accepting the formation of formal mechanisms through which loss and damage can be addressed not in terms of suggestions or technical assistance, but rather as solid and transparent financial pledges.[70]

This discussion on loss and damage paves way for another debate on climate reparations,[71] a thorny issue in international discussions, as quantifying the extent of the damage done by specific actors, and by extension the amount needed for reparations is difficult.[72] Additionally, by accepting the fact that they owe reparations, developed countries risk exposing themselves to a series of lawsuits and litigations.[73] Others argue that the vast injection of climate aid and funds into countries suffering from high levels of corruption is not a sound idea and that this could be used by corrupt governments to co-opt a rightful demand to enrich themselves in ways that do not benefit their population.[74] They also raise the issue that governments can easily become dependent on flows of easy money, thus dissuading them from further developing their economy as there simply isn't any incentive to do so.[75] In response, some activists have argued that loss and damage should not be discussed through the lenses of reparations but from the perspective of solidarity.[76] Countries are owed assistance not because of what happened in the past but because of what will happen in the future if not enough is done.

# Conclusion and Recommendations

At the moment, the outlook is not promising. The 1.5-degree limit objective that has repeatedly been touted since the COP21 looks increasingly unfeasible,[77] meaning that hundreds of millions, if not billions, living in the world's most vulnerable regions, which include the Middle East and Africa, will have to deal with borderline apocalyptic scenarios in the coming decades, and the assistance that they are constantly being promised has so far fallen short of what is required. Indeed, climate finance pledges are not just insufficient; they are also based on faulty systems that hide the true value of what is given. While recent developments on loss and damage are more encouraging, it remains to be seen if substantial pledges will be made and honored. While it is too early to know if COP27 will be

able to result in substantial long-term change, Egypt's side-lining of environmental activists is already a bad omen, as it signals a reluctance to engage with those who carry the voice and the demands of the most affected.

For this COP to be a success, it should achieve significant progress on financing loss and damage. Preferably, developed countries would agree on the formation of a specific body within the UNFCC's mandate to regulate and oversee the distribution of loss and damage funds to deserving countries.[78] In addition, more climate finance must be pledged and offered, and more rigorous standards on what can be labelled as climate finance must be adopted, without abandoning the forgiveness of any debt borne out of it.[79]

A debate could also be had on how climate finance could become more decentralized. Instead of being sent to central governments, climate finance could be more often distributed to communities or activist organizations, ensuring a fairer and more direct allocation of resources. Civil society actors and environment activists could be empowered to handle such processes on a local level, and by being the recipients of part of this financing, their weight and voice could become heavier and more consequential.

This COP could and should be an opportunity to push Arab and African climate activists and their recommendations to the front stage. Youth, indigenous, human rights and feminist activist must also have their voices and perspective heard if a just and adequate discussion is to be had during the COP. The increased visibility can be an opportunity to expand activists' scope of operations and impact, leading to increased local awareness which could lay the foundation for more localised narratives on climate change. Middle Eastern and African activists and scholars have long relied on western narratives and paradigms on the environment, which are not always compatible with local realities. There is a need for new and more localized narratives on climate change that could better reflect everyday concerns.

In 2023, the next COP will remain in the MENA region with the United Arab Emirates hosting COP28. It is reasonable to expect similar debates to take place then. Just as next year's COP28 might have the potential to radically change paradigms about climate change and just transition in the Arab World, it might

also lead nowhere and be yet another failure with long-lasting consequences on climate discussions and negotiations, pushing the world closer to an increasingly unavoidable climate catastrophe.

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## About the author

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# About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

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