



ASG ANALYSIS:

Looking Ahead to COP28

Key takeaways

- The 28th annual Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28) will take place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), from November 30 to December 12, 2023.
- The culmination of the first two-year "Global Stocktake" process, COP28 will be a high-stakes moment for leaders across civil society, government, and the private sector, not only to regain lost momentum due to factors such as the war in Ukraine, global inflationary headwinds, and recession worries but to hold each other accountable and continue a comprehensive assessment of global progress under the Paris Agreement that began at COP26 in Glasgow.
- We expect the UAE COP28 Presidency to put on a well-organized conference that reflects a combination of global climate priorities and local economic interests. As one of the world's largest oil producers, the UAE will likely look to emphasize a phased transition to clean energy with a continued role for hydrocarbons through at least the medium term. The UAE is also keen to position itself as a global leader in decarbonization technologies, nuclear power, renewable energy, and climate finance and will likely announce headline-grabbing initiatives before and during COP28.
- Unlike past COPs, which have generally sought to minimize the role of the private sector, especially carbon-intensive industries, the UAE has made clear that attracting greater private sector involvement is a key priority. This COP, therefore, presents an unparalleled opportunity for the private sector to participate in or sponsor events, announce new climate commitments and partnerships, and engage meaningfully with global leaders to advance sustainability goals as well as government affairs and partnership priorities.

Recap: What happened at COP27

Although it was overshadowed by the war in Ukraine and global inflationary pressures – as well as hampered by poor logistics – COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt, was not entirely without success. Most notably, a groundbreaking agreement was made to provide financial assistance to developing countries for [loss and damage](#) related to climate change. Unfortunately, there was no agreement on where the funds would originate or how the financing would be provided. COP27 saw the first-ever mentions of nature-based solutions, "[tipping points](#)," and the need for financial system reform, including within multilateral development banks and international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. Amid concerns over growing food shortages, there were also – for the first time – pavilions dedicated solely to food and agriculture as the relationship between climate change and food systems takes on new significance.

The COP27 hosts also sought to increase the role of countries in the Global South, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, which had been underrepresented in the past, dubbing COP27 the "Africa COP." Throughout the conference, there was a focus on enabling a more "just transition" for African countries away from traditional sources of energy. As these nations contribute little to global carbon emissions but are disproportionately vulnerable to climate change's impacts, each of the eight [thematic days](#) included at least one agenda item focused on Africa. The "loss and damage" agreement was a major achievement for the developing country group, including the African Group of Negotiators, which struggled initially to get this on the agenda for COP27. Despite this achievement, without clear funding commitments from wealthy countries it is unclear what this agreement will mean in reality.

However, COP27 fell short of its ambitions to deliver "transformative climate action." Despite progress on some regional fronts, nations failed to reach an agreement on new global emissions targets on decarbonization and energy. UK climate envoy Alok Sharma captured the widespread frustration of climate activists and some governments over the text of the final agreement: "Emissions peaking before 2025 as the science tells us is necessary? Not in this text. Clear follow-through on the phase-down of coal? Not in this text. A clear commitment to phase out all fossil fuels? Not in this text." There was also little discussion of plastics pollution and hard-to-decarbonize sectors like the chemical industry and minimal formal government inclusion or discussion of indigenous peoples, youth, Small Island Developing States, and climate refugees. Efforts to establish a voluntary carbon market were also unsuccessful.

See our previous [Analysis](#) for more on COP27.

What we can expect at COP28

Although COP28 is still more than eight months away, anticipation is already building. After the mixed outcome of COP27 and with the Paris Agreement target of limiting global warming to 1.5°C increasingly [at risk](#), this year's conference will be a high-stakes moment to take stock of progress toward the United Nations' climate goals and regain lost momentum. However, the conference will also inevitably reflect some of the UAE's domestic economic considerations as a major global oil producer. This inherent tension between global climate priorities and the UAE's economic interests will likely be a defining feature of COP28. Below are some of the key trends we expect to see at COP28.

- **The “Global Stocktake.”** COP28 will be the culmination of the two-year "global stocktake" process, which began at COP26 in Glasgow. The global stocktake is a central mechanism of the Paris Agreement aimed at helping national governments measure progress toward climate goals, identify what still needs to be done, and find opportunities to raise ambitions. The formal high-level agenda for COP28 looks to pick up where COP27 left off. It covers four broad themes (the first three of which are the same as at COP27): mitigation, adaptation, finance, and loss and damage (see right).
- **The UAE will look to emphasize a phased transition.** The UAE is among the world's ten largest crude oil exporters, and despite (successful) economic diversification efforts, oil revenues still account for about one-third of the country's GDP and an even higher share of government revenues. Accordingly, we expect the hosts to emphasize a gradual energy transition with a continued role for fossil fuels on the way to a clean energy future. Paired with the country's efforts to become a hub for technological innovation, this stance will likely mean that companies working on decarbonization technologies like blue hydrogen, carbon capture and storage, and methane abatement will be particularly welcome at the discussion table. We anticipate this to be an ongoing point of discussion between the hosts and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Secretariat (UNFCCC), which will likely push for a conference agenda that reflects a more aggressive transition away from fossil fuels and holds stakeholders accountable for continued emissions.
- **Dubai is hosting, but this is a UAE-wide event.** The conference will be hosted in Dubai's EXPO City, the former site of EXPO 2020. The choice of Dubai (rather than Abu Dhabi) to host the conference is a practical one – Dubai has greater global connectivity, more experience hosting large events, and more hotel rooms to accommodate conference attendees. Dubai is also keen to repurpose the EXPO site and, again, showcase it as a "green" city. However, COP28 will be a UAE-wide event organized at the federal level and guided from the country's capital, Abu Dhabi. We understand that COP28 is a top priority of UAE senior leadership, who are determined to make the conference a success. This is reflected in the choice of Dr. Sultan Al-Jaber, the UAE Special Climate Envoy and Minister

COP28 AGENDA

Mitigation: Increase renewable energy generation and low-carbon hydrogen production to reduce methane and transform food and agriculture systems through a greater investment in agri-tech, smarter water use, and food production.

Adaptation: Protect the most vulnerable communities and most critical systems from extreme weather and biodiversity loss through investment in nature-based solutions.

Finance: Improve climate finance affordability and accessibility, and reform multilateral development banks and international financial institutions through introducing new blended finance initiatives.

Loss and damage: Help the most vulnerable to rebuild after climate-related disasters and build on the progress made in Sharm El Sheikh to fully operationalize the loss-and-damage fund.

of Industry and Advanced Technology, as the COP28 President-Designate. Widely seen as a rising star in UAE political circles, Dr. Sultan is also managing director and group CEO of oil giant ADNOC and chairman of state-owned renewable energy company Masdar, among other roles.

- **This will *not* be a "Middle East COP."** Unlike COP26, which was European-dominated, and COP27, which billed itself as the "Africa COP," the UAE will look to position COP28 as a truly global event. While COP28 will likely draw large numbers of government officials and business leaders from the Gulf and wider MENA region, partly because of proximity, the UAE will take pains to avoid the conference being pigeonholed as a "Middle East COP." Dubai, in particular, does not see itself just as a regional hub but as a global destination competing with Singapore and Hong Kong.
- **The conference will be well-funded and well-organized.** Unlike COP27, which was marked by poor logistics and took place as Egypt was experiencing financial difficulties, COP28 will be well-funded and -organized. The UAE has a track record of successfully hosting major global events. Whereas the Egyptian COP27 Presidency did not release the final schedule and agenda until just weeks before the event, the UAE COP28 Presidency will look to announce the program well in advance, will be much more proactive in communicating with attendees and the public, and will mobilize an army of event planners, consultants, and PR experts to put on a slick "show."
- **Increased role for the private sector.** The UAE has made it clear that one of its foremost priorities for COP28 is to increase private sector participation. This was evident at COP27, where a large UAE delegation mingled with business representatives and requested feedback on what they hoped to see at COP28. Whereas past COPs largely shunned companies in carbon-intensive industries and sought to limit private sector participation more broadly (including speaking slots and pavilions), we expect the UAE to eagerly court business leaders and business and industry NGOs to attend the conference. The UAE will likely, however, face pushback from the UNFCCC Secretariat over the extent of formal industry participation, and we expect this will be a topic of ongoing discussion over the coming months, including at the Bonn Climate Change Conference in June, where the issue is on the agenda.
- **Focus on (domestic) economic priorities.** As with other global events it has hosted, we expect the UAE to use COP28 to advance its domestic economic priorities (particularly industrial development), expand its international trade relations and partnerships, and promote itself as a business and investment destination. The UAE believes it is particularly well-positioned to become a global leader in green/blue hydrogen and carbon capture and storage, leveraging its access to cheap natural gas and its high solar energy potential. The UAE will also position itself as a global climate finance leader, leveraging the capital of institutional investors like Mubadala and ADQ and the technical expertise of companies like Masdar to bring renewable energy projects to the developing world.
- **Limited space for climate activism.** Many climate activists worry that the UAE, as a major global oil producer, will seek to stymie real climate action. The choice of Dr. Sultan Al Jaber as COP28 President-Designate, in particular, prompted a wave of criticism citing his role as CEO of ADNOC. The UAE has been quick to remind critics that it was the first country in the region to ratify the Paris Agreement, the first to commit to an economy-wide

reduction in emissions, and the first to announce a Net Zero by 2050 strategic initiative. The COP28 site is a bit removed from downtown Dubai, access will be tightly restricted, and the country at large is not open to public activism. While COP28 may attract heightened criticism from climate activists internationally, there is likely to be limited space for climate activism at the conference itself.

Making the most of COP28

As the UAE looks to increase the role of the private sector in COP28, clients have a unique opportunity to engage meaningfully in the lead-up as well as at the conference itself.

- **Start developing a strategy now.** While it was difficult for attendees to plan ahead for COP27 – the agenda, as mentioned, was not released until just weeks before the event – this will not be the case for COP28. The UAE COP28 Presidency is already soliciting input from the private and public sectors and dropping hints about priorities for the conference. Interested parties should begin developing strategies to maximize their impact at COP28, setting clear goals for engagement, identifying which stakeholders to engage, and laying out an actionable plan for engaging with these stakeholders before and during the conference.
Unlike past COPs, where companies were very limited in how they could engage, COP28 will likely present much greater opportunities for industry participation.
- **Consider the full scope of engagement opportunities.** Unlike past COPs, where companies were very limited in how they could engage, COP28 will likely present much greater opportunities for industry participation. Specifically, companies should consider:
 - *Commitments:* Commit to credible target-setting initiatives such as the Science-Based Targets initiative, Race to Zero, and First Movers Coalition.
 - *Speaking opportunities:* Participate in events to share best practices, report on climate action, or commit to new ambitions.
 - *Partnerships:* Join major international coalitions already driving change in their sectors or form new bi- or multilateral partnerships for joint action.
 - *Sponsorships:* Engage stakeholders via pavilions.
 - *Government affairs:* Use the conference as a platform for effective government affairs engagement with officials from around the world.
- **Think local as well as global.** By definition, COPs represent a combination of global climate priorities and local host country priorities, but this will be especially true at COP28, where the UAE will leave its mark on the conference agenda and look to establish itself as a leader in global climate dialogues. When developing strategies for engagement at COP28, clients should involve stakeholders who understand the local landscape and how to translate global corporate values and commitments into terms that will resonate with local stakeholders.

About ASG

Albright Stonebridge Group (ASG), part of Dentons Global Advisors, is the premier global strategy and commercial diplomacy firm. We help clients understand and successfully navigate the intersection of public, private, and social sectors in international markets. ASG's worldwide team has served clients in more than 120 countries.

ASG's [Sustainability practice](#) has extensive experience helping companies navigate previous COPs. Our [Middle East & North Africa \(MENA\) practice](#) has deep understanding of the UAE landscape and a proven track record of helping clients translate their goals into terms that resonate locally.

Please find a description of our COP28 offering for clients [here](#). For questions or to arrange a follow-up conversation, contact:

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