

DEPENDING ON WHO YOU BELIEVE, the latest UN Climate Change Conference, COP28, held in Dubai in December, was an historic success, a huge disappointment or a step in the right direction. Whoever is right, it did culminate in an agreement of sorts, which is quite an accomplishment after 14 days of intense negotiation involving 85,000 attendees from nearly 200 countries. But the agreement was merely to 'transition away' from fossil fuels instead of phasing them out altogether – which is critical – and had no clear goals or fixed timelines.

Essentially, the world agreed to 'try harder', which is shorthand for 'not happening any time soon'.

No one can deny that we are failing. Eight years after the Paris Agreement, which committed to limiting global warming to no more than 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, the only real change has been in the intensifying severity of the climate crisis. COP28 was held in the hottest year in human history, when we witnessed the catastrophic impact of climate change for ourselves, with extreme heatwaves, severe storms, floods, droughts, melting ice and wildfires becoming the new 'norm' as we head into scarily uncharted territory.

It could have been worse. The fact that fossil fuels even got a mention is a triumph. One draft version of the agreement actually dropped all references to the root cause of climate change entirely. Food also got a mention (it's hard to believe it has taken so long, given that food is responsible for roughly a third of all global greenhouse gas emissions). But while it is now on the table, with more than 150 countries agreeing to integrate food and agriculture into their climate plans, it's only a side dish – the language doesn't go far enough and the declaration is not legally binding.

COP28 was hosted by the United Arab Emirates, one of the world's leading petrostates, and the conference president, Sultan Al Jaber, is head of UAE's national oil company. Maybe that set the tone? Fossil fuel and agricultural lobbyists were present in record numbers (literally in their thousands).

It's not difficult to conclude that this

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UAE's Sultan Al Jaber presided over December's COP28

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MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

over-representation of vested interests inevitably influenced the outcome by moving the narrative away from anything that might signal the end of their business models and vast profits.

Meanwhile, the summit was festooned with the promise of 'magical' technological fixes to innovate our way out of this Herculean problem. Prevaricating politicians are clearly hoping that scientists will do all the heavy lifting. CO2 capture is one of these imaginary silver bullets. It may be part of a long-term solution, but currently removes less than one-millionth of CO2 emissions (excluding nature-based means such as planting trees).

There were also flagrant inconsistencies between words and actions. Rishi Sunak, for example, who spent a grand total of 11 hours at the summit, called for "an era of

action... not just pledges". Yet Sunak has recently given permission for a new coal mine (from which 85 per cent of production will be exported) and is maxing out oil and gas production in the North Sea. Despite

government claims about self-sufficiency, 60 per cent of our homegrown gas and 80 per cent of our oil is exported. And, worse, they're all still fossil fuels.

So was COP28 in Dubai a success? Well, to be honest, there is

only one measure of a truly successful COP, and that is when global carbon emissions stop rising and start falling. Yet for all its flaws, the conference has helped to frame the debate, generate clear goals and push us, albeit achingly slowly, a little further in the right direction.

Besides, there is nothing else. The UN Climate Change Conference is all we have. **W**

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