**The elephant in the COP28 room**

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As the gavel struck, finalizing the 21-page deal at the COP28 summit in Dubai, a wave of mixed emotions swept across the faces of delegates. It was a moment of historical significance, and yet one marred by the realization that the path to combat climate change remains steep and treacherous.

The central tenet of the agreement – for the first time in COP history – is a collective acknowledgment of the need to transition away from fossil fuels. This inclusion in the final text marks a significant departure from previous COPs, where explicit references to coal, oil, and gas were conspicuously absent.

Norway’s Climate Minister Espen Barth Eide has aptly referred to fossil fuels as the ‘elephant in the room’, a sentiment echoed by many.

The agreement’s language is indicative of the complex geopolitical and economic landscape that shapes global climate policy. While it stops short of demanding a phase-out of fossil fuels – a demand many governments championed – it instead nudges countries to “contribute” to transitioning away from fossil fuels “in a just, orderly, and equitable manner”.

This phrasing, though less forceful than some might have hoped, is a clear nod to the future of energy systems and the pressing need to rethink our dependence on carbon-heavy fuels.

Another key aspect of the deal is the recognition that global emissions will likely peak before 2025 – though for developing nations this timeline may extend further. This acknowledgement underlines the uneven playing field in global climate efforts, where developing countries grapple with the dual challenge of economic growth and environmental sustainability.

On the critical fronts of adaptation and finance, the language in the agreement appears diluted. The text merely reiterates the need for developed countries to support vulnerable nations facing the brunt of climate change, a step back from more assertive ‘requests’ or demands. This softening of stance raises concerns about the commitment level of affluent nations in aiding those less fortunate in their climate resilience efforts.

Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber, the president of COP28, styled the summit as a historic turning point. Indeed, the explicit mention of fossil fuels and the need for a transition marks a significant stride. However, the agreement’s fundamental weakness lies in its lack of enforceability. The language employed does little more than invite countries to participate in climate action, lacking the compelling force that many activists and experts deem necessary.

This lack of compulsion was candidly acknowledged by Al-Jaber, who has emphasized that the success of this deal hinges on “implementation” – how earnestly countries translate these commitments into action. The metaphor of doing the washing up highlights the disparity between making a token contribution and shouldering a fair share of the workload.

Simon Stiell, a senior UN climate change diplomat, has pointed to “genuine strides forward”, particularly the pledge to treble renewable energy capacity by 2030 and the establishment of a fund for wealthy nations to support those grappling with the impacts of climate change.

Brazil’s climate minister, Marina Silva, has emphasized the role of developed countries in leading the transition away from fossil fuels and underscored Brazil’s commitment to hosting COP30 in the Amazon city of Belem.

John Kerry, America’s climate envoy, has acknowledged the imperfect nature of the deal but highlighted it as a cause for optimism. Kerry’s remarks underscore the balancing act between ambition and realism that defines international climate negotiations.

Indeed, the COP28 agreement is a testament to the painstaking process of global diplomacy. It reflects the myriad interests, concerns, and aspirations of nearly 200 participating countries, each wrestling with their unique socio-economic and political realities. The outcome, therefore, is a document that threads a middle path, offering hope yet simultaneously underscoring the monumental challenges that lie ahead.

As the world will now be gearing up for COP29 in Azerbaijan and eventually COP30 in Brazil, Pakistan faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities in its approach to climate change. A country profoundly impacted by environmental issues, Pakistan’s preparation for COP29 needs to be strategic, robust, and forward-thinking.

First things first, Pakistan should base its climate policy on being a climate-resilient economic power, ensuring climate justice both within and globally. Pakistan must intensify its focus on climate adaptation strategies. The country is prone to extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and heatwaves, exacerbated by climate change. These pose severe risks to agriculture, water resources, and overall public health.

Developing comprehensive adaptation plans, including improved water management, sustainable agriculture practices, and resilient infrastructure, is paramount. Pakistan should seek technical and financial support from international partners for these initiatives, leveraging the platforms provided by COP29 to forge collaborative relationships.

Enhancing renewable energy capacity is another critical area. Pakistan’s energy sector heavily relies on fossil fuels, contributing significantly to its carbon footprint. By COP29, Pakistan should aim to present a clear, actionable roadmap for transitioning to renewable energy sources like solar, wind, and hydro power. This transition ought to not only align with global climate goals but also address the country’s persistent energy crises.

Pakistan’s unique geographical and ecological diversity, including its vast mountain ranges and river systems, necessitates a robust conservation strategy. Protecting and expanding its forests, investing in sustainable land use, and preserving biodiversity are actions that will not only combat climate change but also protect the livelihoods of millions who depend on these ecosystems.

Moreover, Pakistan should focus on climate finance, both in terms of accessing international funds and efficiently utilizing them. It is crucial for Pakistan to advocate for easier access to climate finance at COP29, especially considering its status as a developing country facing severe climate impacts. Effective utilization of these funds in transparent and impactful projects will be a critical measure of success.

On a policy level, Pakistan needs to integrate climate change considerations into all aspects of national planning and development. This includes revising existing policies and introducing new legislation that aligns with its climate goals. By COP29, Pakistan should aim to showcase a cohesive, cross-sectoral policy approach that demonstrates its commitment to addressing climate change.

Finally, public awareness and community engagement are vital. Pakistan must continue to educate its population about the impacts of climate change and the importance of sustainable practices. Engaging communities in climate action not only empowers them but also ensures the sustainability of initiatives.

I hope Pakistan will have a representative government by COP29, and local governments by then as well, as one of the major highlights from COP28 is the need of multi-level action and significance of city and local governments.

As Pakistan and the world now head to COP29 and COP30, the nation stands at a crossroads. The choices and investments Pakistan makes today will have long-lasting impacts on its climate resilience and sustainable development. Preparing for COP29 is not just about policy papers and pledges; it is about setting a course towards a sustainable future for all Pakistanis.

As the world moves forward from COP28, the key question remains: will this agreement, non-binding and cautiously worded as it is, catalyze the profound and urgent action required to confront the climate crisis?

The answer lies not in the text of the agreement but in the actions of the signatories in the months and years to come. The world, now more than ever, needs bold steps, not just cautious strides. In addressing the ‘elephant in the room’ at COP29 and COP30, the clear and present need to phase out fossil fuels stands as our most significant stride towards safeguarding our planet’s future.

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