Colorado College at COP29 in Baku: Ethnographers Engaging in UN Climate Action Efforts

A Collection of Final Student Projects

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Introduction:
Colorado College Student Ethnographers at COP29 in Baku

Sarah Hautzinger

Professor of Anthropology, Colorado College

The United Nation's 29th annual summit on climate change, also known as "COP29" of the UNFCCC (Conference of the Parties for the United Nations Framework for the Convention on Climate Change), met in Azerbaijan, in November of 2024. The meeting was widely referred to as "the Finance COP," with the specific goal of updating the funding for climate adaptation and mitigation from the $100 billion per year specified in the 2015 Paris Agreement. While that goal was tripled to $300 billion, it fell far short of the $1.3 trillion being called upon by developing countries. COP29 also finalized the sole outstanding article of the Paris Agreement, specifying how carbon markets will function to help countries deliver their climate plans and accelerate progress to half global emissions in this decade.

For the sixth time, in 2024 a Colorado College delegation joined participating, civil-society observer organizations. This iteration came in the form of a course entitled "**Engaging COP29 in Azerbaijan as Ethnographers."** Co-instructors Sarah Hautzinger and Myra Jackson selected eight students from dozens of applicants; most had completed the climate-facing prerequisite "Anthropocene," cross-listed in Anthropology and Environmental Studies. Both courses engage broad questions about the meanings of being human at a time of anthropogenically caused crisis. Approaching the COP as ethnographers invites a story-telling, "beginner's mind" approach to many facets beyond the central negotiations: students wrote about the people they met in attendance, what it meant for an authoritarian, oil-producing state like the Azerbaijan to host (arguably for the third year in a row, following Egypt in 2022 and United Arab Emirates in 2023), and many of the side events, pavilions, and exhibits they took in on the periphery of the negotiations. As student ethnographers, they used straight-forward, first-person voices, avoided loaded or opinionated language in favor of thick description and evidence, and included the emotional weight – and commitment and passion – that our formidable climate challenges invoke for themselves personally as well as for their interlocutors. Their varied foci ranged broadly, from UNFCCC efficacy and governance to climate finance and justice; from the ways coastal areas, the Arctic, or effects of armed conflict showed up at COP29 to the influence of the Gender and Women's Constituency. Regarding the last, Havalin Haskell's piece included an "auto-ethnographic," personal narrative of experiences of sexual harassment at COP30 in Baku; this formed the basis for an official complaint Colorado College filed with the UNFCCC, a first for the college, and one we hope will aid in mitigating future attendees from experiencing unwelcome and intrusive attention that hampered their participation.

Because the work continues -- as it must.

--Professor Sarah Hautzinger, Anthropology and Environmental Studies

Table of Contents

Blended Finance at COP29: Challenges and Stakeholder Perspectives

Abby Lee

The 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP29, dubbed the "Finance COP," marked a critical moment in global climate action. For the first time in 15 years, world leaders gathered to set a new climate finance target, the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), which aimed to replace the outdated 2009 commitment. Under the earlier agreement, developed nations pledged to provide $100 billion annually by 2020 to support developing countries in reducing emissions and building climate resilience. However, since then, the goal was only met in 2022, two years after the initial deadline. The goal remains insufficient, and the impacts of climate change have only intensified.

During a High-Level session on Innovation for Climate and Sustainability Action on the conference's opening day, panelists said, "1.5°C is not a goal but a physical limit," a point beyond which climate consequences could be catastrophic. The only viable path forward, speakers emphasized, is exponential change driven by innovation: "We cannot rely on linear, incremental growth. The challenge is that we need to make innovation affordable." Yet, affordability is impeded by global economic dynamics. For example, the success of the U.S. equity market built on a scaled system of enterprises creates a barrier to clean energy investments: why would investors move their money elsewhere? This raises a more crucial question: How can innovation in clean energy sectors be catalyzed at scale — particularly in regions that need it most?

I explored this challenge by attending a COP29 session titled "The Role of Technical Assistance and Blended Finance for Catalyzing Innovation in Clean Energy Sectors," featuring panelists from Invest India, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), Investcorp Climate Solutions, and the World Economic Forum (WEF). The discussion centered on blended finance — a preexisting concept that came up regularly throughout the two weeks of COP29 as a potential mechanism to unlock climate finance and drive sustainable development. This paper explores what blended finance is and how different stakeholders, ranging from multilateral organizations and private investors to academics and government leaders, perceived and addressed challenges of mobilizing climate finance at COP29.

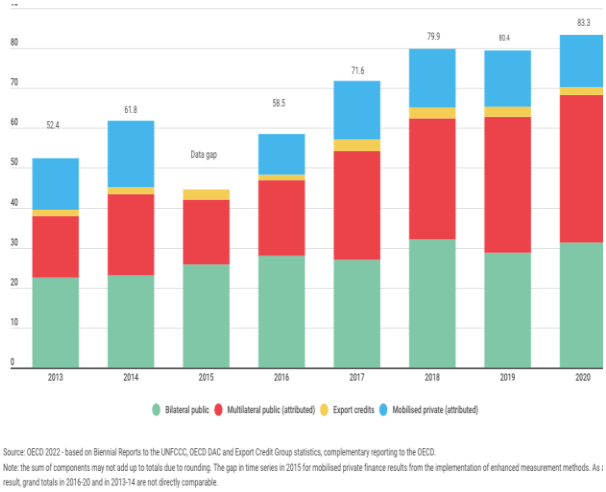
What is Blended Finance?

Blended finance is the strategic use of public or philanthropic funds to attract and de-risk private sector investment in development or climate-related projects that are otherwise considered too risky or unattractive for private investors alone (Randall 2022). It combines concessional capital, a type of financing with more favorable terms than the market, such as grants and equity-like capital, with non-concessional capital to provide repayable finance to enterprises. By taking on concessional roles, organizations that are mission-driven with limited budgets, like governments, foundations, and quasi-governmental bodies, can unlock larger pools of private investment for social or environmental impact goals. Investors in a non-concessional role, such as those seeking market-rate returns, benefit from concessional capital, which helps lower the risk of the deal by protecting against potential defaults. This reassures investors who may have otherwise been hesitant, increasing the overall capital available for social and environmental impact (Todres 2023).

An example of how blended finance can mobilize private capital for climate-related

projects is the Energy Resilience Fund (ERF), a £15 million fund designed to help UK charities and social enterprises reduce energy costs and enhance energy efficiency. This fund combines loans with grants: 40% of the funding it offers is grants, which lowers the cost of the loans and makes the investment more accessible to organizations with limited financial resources. The fund supports the installation of energy-saving measures or renewable energy technologies, such as retrofitting buildings or upgrading to energy-efficient equipment. The ERF attracts private investment (from Better Society Capital, Social Investment Business Foundation, and Access — The Foundation for Social Investment) and reduces financial risk, enabling organizations to cut carbon emissions, stabilize energy costs, and contribute to long-term Net Zero goals.

Climate finance provided and mobilized in 2013-2020 (US$ billion)



Source: OECD 2022 - based on Biennial Reports to the UNFCCC, OECD DAC and Export Credit Group statistics, complementary reporting to the OECD.
Note: the sum of components may not add up to totals due to rounding. The gap in time series in 2015 for mobilised private finance results from the implementation of enhanced measurement methods. As a result, grand totals in 2016-20 and in 2013-14 are not directly comparable.

Source: European Network on Debt and Development (EURODAD)

According to a graph by Eurodad, the "mobilized private" portion of climate finance, though often the second smallest after export credits (Achampong 2022). Despite this, blended finance continued to be one of the common topics of discussion at COP29, such as formally in special events on Trade Day (November 14) or informally at pavilions outside of Trade Day. Blended finance is highly relevant in the context of climate change, particularly in mobilizing more capital to address the significant funding gaps in climate action and climate innovation.

The Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN) highlights the growing impact investment industry, which has mobilized over USD 228 billion in recent years. However, the sector still faces a daunting challenge, as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have an estimated annual funding gap of USD 5 to 7 trillion. Blended finance offers a solution to bridge this gap, allowing conventional capital to flow into funds, companies, and projects that also deliver social and environmental impact, including those that address climate change. By blending public, philanthropic, and private capital, these structures can unlock additional funding for climate action, which is crucial for meeting global climate goals and the Net Zero targets.

While blended finance is often discussed in climate finance, especially at the Finance COP, the definitions vary across stakeholders. Each definition has its emphasis, largely due to each institution's focus (Anshori, Salomo, and Kusumastuti 2023). This variation complicates the design of blended finance vehicles, making it challenging to align expectations, create structures that meet the diverse needs of all parties involved, and scale blended finance projects effectively.

Stakeholder Perspectives

1. Perspectives from Not-for-Profit Organizations: Knowledge Transfer & Measurable Metrics

At the session “Role of Technical Assistance and Blended Finance for Catalyzing Innovation in Clean Energy Sectors,” the World Economic Forum’s Head of Investment and Services, Matthew Stephenson, underscored the

importance of rethinking blended finance to address its limitations. According to Stephenson, a "new version" of blended finance requires fostering knowledge transfer. This means providing technical assistance (an instrument used in blended finance transactions, typically a direct grant and/or free advice and business support) at multiple levels—strategic, operational, and project-specific—to help developing countries attract and effectively manage private investments. By enabling capacity building, technical assistance can ensure that blended finance initiatives are both efficient and sustainable.

Similarly, Nan Li Collins, Senior Director for Investment and Enterprise at UNCTAD, stressed the importance of developing clear and measurable metrics for blended finance projects. She argued that transparency and accountability are critical, particularly when channeling funds toward markets that need the most support. By establishing clear success metrics that evaluate both financial viability and social impact, blended finance can better serve vulnerable communities while attracting more private sector interest. Collins' emphasis on measurable outcomes reflects a broader challenge: aligning the goals of different stakeholders. For blended finance to scale effectively, projects must demonstrate not only profitability but also tangible social and environmental progress.

2. Perspectives from Academics and Think Tanks: Creating Credit Equity and Exportability

In an UNFCCC pavilion event titled "Mobilizing the Trillions: Unlocking Public and Private Climate Finance," Professor Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia University highlighted the issue of credit rating transparency and bias, which disproportionately affects developing countries. He noted that only a few countries in the G77 and China group are classified as "investment-grade," meaning they are deemed creditworthy for low-risk investments. This bias prevents developing countries from accessing affordable climate finance, as their projects are often labeled as "speculative grade."

- Investment-grade vs. Speculative-grade: Credit ratings are assigned by agencies (e.g., S&P, Moody's) based on perceived default risk. Investment-grade ratings signal lower risk, while speculative-grade ratings suggest higher risk, leading to higher borrowing costs.
- The problem: Currently, countries can access concessional financing primarily based on their poverty level, institutional framework, creditworthiness, and performance implementing investments. Credit rating agencies often overlook climate-related investments' long-term benefits. For some countries, ratings are even withdrawn, further marginalizing their access to global capital markets.

Upon further research into the bias Professor Sachs highlighted, emerging markets were largely excluded from credit ratings until the 1990s, with only 12 rated by Moody's in 1993 and just 10 African nations rated by the top agencies in 2003. By 2021, this number rose to 31, yet international investors still favor rated securities over unrated ones, regardless of comparable credit risk. Moreover, for the Global South, climate and environmental investments often negatively impact ratings, as agencies fail to account for their long-term benefits (2024).

Tim Cheston from the Harvard Growth Lab, whose interactive tool "Greenplexity" was launched in Baku and supported by the Ministry of Economy of the Government of Azerbaijan, introduced an additional layer of complexity by evaluating climate projects based on export/importability and economic feasibility.

He argued that financing decisions depend on a country's ability to scale projects beyond local use, which can limit opportunities for nations that rely heavily on domestic consumption rather than exports.

3. Perspectives from Philanthropic Organizations: Reforming Multilateral Development Banks

During the same event that Professor Sachs spoke at, Lucy Kessler from the Bezos Earth Fund called for urgent Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) reforms to make blended finance more effective. She advocated for MDBs to be "bigger, better, and bolder" by increasing their capacity to take risks and provide concessional funding. This reform is critical for unlocking private sector capital in emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs).

To achieve this transformation, MDBs can support developing nations by identifying investment priorities, aligning domestic policies, and building pipelines of investible projects. They can foster collaboration among donors, international finance institutions, private sector actors, and philanthropies to promote country-led just transitions.

Moreover, Kessler highlighted that concessional financing, currently assessed based on poverty levels, institutional frameworks, and creditworthiness, should also account for climate vulnerability. This adjustment would prioritize vulnerable nations like small island states, which are often excluded despite facing catastrophic climate risks.

Beyond reallocating existing funds, MDBs should also expand available resources by leveraging their capital more effectively and mobilizing private sector funding. Additionally, MDBs should increase investment in adaptation and resilience projects, as most of their client countries are highly vulnerable to climate impacts, even if they are not major emitters. These reforms are crucial for addressing the dual challenge of financing climate mitigation and adaptation in the Global South.

4. Perspectives from the Private Sector: Issues with Transparency and Access

At COP29, concerns were raised about the accessibility of climate finance. The U.S. delegation emphasized that while climate finance exists, small businesses and local projects often struggle to access it due to a lack of awareness or technical knowledge.

In the UNFCCC pavilion event "Supercharging collaboration between public and private sectors in achieving net zero," Anthony Hobley, Deputy Chair of Climate Risk and Resilience at Howden Group (a UK-based insurance company), stressed that private capital requires predictability and certainty to mitigate risks in emerging markets. Political instability, currency volatility, and underdeveloped insurance markets add layers of complexity.

Blended Insurance and Risk Mitigation

Risk management was another critical element tied to blended finance. Limited risk mitigation tools exacerbate political, economic, and climate risks in emerging markets, discouraging private sector involvement. Access and transparency issues also persist, as local projects often lack the knowledge or resources to navigate complex climate finance systems. These challenges must be addressed to unlock the full potential of blended finance. Blended insurance solutions, such as Climate and Disaster Risk Finance and Insurance (CDRFI), were discussed as tools to address the uncertainties associated with climate investments. CDRFI mechanisms help de-risk projects in emerging markets by providing insurance coverage for climate-related disasters, which can reassure private investors.

Conclusion

At COP29, stakeholders highlighted several key challenges in implementing blended finance effectively. A lack of standardization, with varying definitions and expectations, creates inefficiencies and hampers scaling. Credit rating biases further disadvantage developing countries by labeling their projects as high-risk, increasing borrowing costs and deterring investment.

The discussions at COP29 underscored the urgency of reforming and standardizing blended finance to mobilize climate capital effectively. Stakeholders from multilateral organizations, academics, and private investors agreed on key solutions: the need for clear metrics, MDB reforms, and robust risk management tools like blended insurance. Most importantly, blended finance must evolve to foster knowledge transfer, ensure accessibility for local actors, and address systemic barriers such as credit rating biases. Looking forward, a critical question remains: How can blended finance frameworks be standardized and scaled to ensure equitable access for developing countries? COP29 demonstrated that the path forward requires collaboration, innovation, and bold reforms to unlock the climate finance pool and drive transformative action toward a sustainable future.

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"It's Been a Year and We are Back Here Suffering": Where do We Go from Here?

A reflection on the failures of climate finance negotiations at COP29 from a first-time attendee.

Ella Reese-Clauson

International Political Economy, 26'

Joyce Banda[1], former president of Malawi, hurried into Side Event room 7 at the Twenty-Ninth Conference of the Parties (COP29) to the United Nations Climate Change Conference surrounded by a group of her advisers and coworkers. Still bundled in a long down jacket and toting her carry-on suitcase, Banda and her cohort had come straight to the COP29 venue from Baku's Heydar Aliyev International Airport. This particular event was titled "From Commitments to Action: Mobilizing Climate Finance for Effective Implementation" and boasted an impressive panel of experts including Banda, Honorable Minister Sithembiso Nyoni of Zimbabwe, former Director General of European Investment Bank Global Andrew McDowell, and United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) executive director Jorge Moreira da Silva.

Banda collapsed into her seat and launched into a tired rant about her qualms with the UNFCCC. It has been over thirty years, she detailed, since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)[2] that formed the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and laid the groundwork for COP. In those thirty-two years, Banda and her compatriots had heard about pledges that were never realized. Year in and year out, she had "stood by helplessly" as she watched her constituents suffer because of these unmet promises. She watched as entire villages were wiped away and she listened as those who lost their homes, families, and livelihoods concluded that God was cursing them for their own behaviors, unaware that they and the rest of the Global South were paying the price for "sins [they] did not commit—" the sins, in the form of emissions, of the Global North. She wondered aloud whether she would come to COP again and whether it was a waste of time and resources for a country like Malawi to send such essential members of their governing body away for two weeks every year for nothing to be accomplished. "It's been a year," she noted "and [they] are back here suffering."

The finance that was successfully gathered, Banda explained, took a year to access, by which point three more disasters could strike. But on the local level, change was happening. The private sector was successfully funding projects within Malawi and the country had received the highest project price for any climate mitigation investment project in all of Africa the prior year. So, she mused, "It's happening at the small scale. Why is it not happening here?" Her conclusion reverberated through the room as the discussion moderator organized his notes: "We know exactly what to do in this room, but it's not happening."

As a student ethnographer, I had entered COP29 with cautious optimism. I had left the United States the day after the harrowing 2024 presidential election in which Donald Trump was reelected, a result that solidified the nation's path of pulling out of the Paris climate accord. The morning of the election, I was grasping for hope and placed it squarely on the shoulders of

[1] Leaders, "Joyce Banda."

[2] "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3-14 June 1992."

the UNFCCC and COP29, a perhaps naive decision. Banda's remarks toppled that hope.

But on the first Tuesday of the conference, my first day badged for the conference's restricted-access Blue Zone, I had felt a surge in hope. I felt a childish sense of pride as I donned my UNFCCC observer badge for the first time, my badging organization—Earth Law Center—and full name printed beneath my picture in gleaming silver font. The first session I attended was organized by the faith pavilion, "Beyond Numbers: An Interfaith Dialogue on the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) from Faith and Ethical Perspectives." The event was held in Special Events Room Hirkan, a large room near the entrance to the Blue Zone with tables arranged in a rectangle around a series of televisions projecting the images of panelists. Rows of chairs stood between the entrance and the roundtable, presumably for the audience. I took a seat in one of these chairs, pulling out my field notebook and checking my schedule for the day. As the discussion began, however, the moderator invited the audience to join the roundtable, hoping to create a non-hierarchical conversation rather than a traditional panel. I relocated behind a tabletop microphone that, though I never turned on, gave me a swelling of faith in the COP29 process and its accessibility.

Faith leaders from more than a dozen distinct religions globally sat around the table with me, vehemently critiquing existing processes. They spoke to the need for climate finance to come in grants rather than loans to prevent cycles of debilitating debt, the need for this finance to go to Indigenous communities with local knowledge, and the need for continued energy towards adaptation and loss and damage funds. Though the message did not reflect well on the historical COP process, the fact that these conversations were taking place within the hastily constructed temporary hallways of COP29 gave me hope.

This paper will attempt to detail the path of that hope at COP29, starting first with some of the more encouraging sessions I went to before digging into the fissures that made that faith vanish. I will bring the reader with me as I witness firsthand some of the conference's many failures but also highlight a few successes that leave me feeling a sense of faith, no longer in the UNFCCC and its institutions but in the people that make COPs run.

Banda's remarks on global climate finance ring true for many developing nations globally. But first, some context on climate finance: The original 1992 Convention on Climate Change, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and the 2015 Paris Agreement all "call for financial assistance from Parties with more financial resources to those that are less endowed and more vulnerable." [3] That call has had varying degrees of legal 'teeth' for accountability, but, starting with the Copenhagen agreement in 2009, 43 'developed' countries were expected to collectively provide USD $100 billion annually to 153 'developing' nations.[4] This money was then divided into two categories: mitigation—"actions to prevent or reduce greenhouse gas emissions"—and adaptation— "actions required to manage the impacts of unavoidable climate change."

Despite this commitment, that $100 billion annual quantum took until 2022 to be fully realized, leaving communities reeling in the meantime.[5] The money comprises a combination of bilateral (between two countries) public funds, multilateral (between more than two countries) public funds, export credits, and

[3] "What Is Climate Finance?"

[4] Loft and Burnett, "The UK and the US$100 Billion Climate Finance Goal."

[5] "Climate Finance and the USD 100 Billion Goal."

mobilized private funds in a mixture known as 'blended finance' and largely is in the format of loans for specific projects, such as a wind farm or a dam that could generate returns for investors. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, much of this money never reached the communities that needed it. The money was inaccessible, often taking a year or more to access when communities needed it urgently. The process of requesting these funds is also bureaucratic, leaving many in-need groups unaware of how to apply. The money that did get sent out often got stuck with intermediaries or corrupted governments and didn't reach the areas in need.

In Paris in 2015, nations formally recognized the need to address loss and damage from climate change impacts, particularly for developing countries. This acknowledgment was strengthened at COP26 in Glasgow with the creation of the Santiago Network for Loss and Damage, but the crucial question of funding remained unresolved. Finally, at 2023's COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, nations achieved a historic breakthrough with the operationalization of the Loss and Damage Fund. The fund was launched with initial pledges totaling $792 million, with the largest contributions coming from the UAE ($100 million) and Germany ($100 million).[6] However, these pledges fell far short of the estimated annual loss and damage needs of developing countries, which range from $290-580 billion by 2030.

In that first week, I attended session after session where panels composed of representatives of Multilateral Development Banks (MBDs), environmental ministers of various small developing countries, activists, and NGO employees proposed innovative, clearly delineated ideas to support climate finance. Over and over, I sat in crowds largely made up of observing delegates, furiously scribbling notes as panelists presented the problems and proposed solutions. They spoke tiredly of risk and questionable good governance warding off private sector investment and lamented non-quantifiable lifestyle losses and damages before launching into animated proposals for innovative new ideas like Climate and Disaster Risk Finance and Insurance (CDRFI),[7] expedited corruption assessments to get money on the ground quicker, decentralized allocations of climate finance to prioritize local solutions and indigenous knowledge, cash transfers through mobile banks, and more. I tuned in to roundtables where ministers from high-risk nations outlined their nations' most dire climate troubles and the exact finance and support they needed.

The problems were grave, but I felt a sense of encouragement hearing so much consensus from people who seemed, in my mind, to have the power to make the change.

Slowly, however, my faith began to deteriorate. On day six of the conference, I made it into the room for a high-level dialogue with nongovernmental organization (NGO) constituencies called "Mobilizing Adequate and Urgent Climate Finance." The talk, despite being a mandated dialogue, was filled with empty chairs. COP29 president, Mukhtar Babayev, and UNFCCC Executive Secretary, Simon Stiell, opened up the conversation with a practiced spiel on the need for these talks, noting that NGO groups are "closer to the needs of the people on the ground." After their speeches, the pair hurried out of the room escorted by teams of advisors. Whether or not they were headed to other meetings, the message was the same: they

[6] Songwe, Stern, and Bhattacharya, "Finance for Climate Action up Investment for climate and Development."

[7] "Climate and Disaster Risk Finance and Insurance."

cared about the meeting enough to give a speech using the right words, but not enough to stay and listen.

The floor opened to the constituency groups and each one provided a brief intervention on their group's needs. Liane Schaletek, representing the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC), gave what I found to be the most compelling presentation. With a PowerPoint full of intuitive graphs backing up her words, Schaletek outlined the problems with the existing climate finance framework—including the often-raised fact that the UNFCCC still lacks an exact definition for the term—and outlined a four-action-step proposal for raising public revenues through tax justice, a clear plan to reduce the cost of capital, and proposed reform for credit rating agencies. The presentation was the clearest action plan I had heard so far at the COP, yet so few representatives of member states were in the room to hear it and those that were were largely low-level trainee negotiators.

A representative of Chile perfectly encapsulated my thoughts, boldly turning on his microphone to challenge the existing UNFCCC structure. He explained that the UNFCCC packs schedules so full that negotiators lack the time to speak with constituencies. He emphasized the importance of this event and his disappointment in its sparse attendance. He wondered aloud whether it was time to look critically at the COP schedule to prioritize more events of this format.

Negotiators at COPs, I later found out, often stay in the venue into the early hours of the morning for days on end. Myra Jackson, UN Permanent representative in New York, Diplomat of the Biosphere, and rights of nature advocate, joined our delegation at COP29 and spoke once to the burden of the negotiator. According to her, negotiators often have to deliberately ignore anything—any need, any suffering—beyond the scope of what their country will allow them to negotiate "because it hurts" to keep hearing of the suffering and be unable to fix it.

This phenomenon was clear in many of the events I attended on the ground at COP29, where negotiators were noticeably absent and where panelists seemed to be talking in circles. The COP was seemingly split into two separate conferences, one deeper into the venue where negotiators and those with access—noticeably, this often included some of the many fossil fuel lobbyists present—would meet either multilaterally or bilaterally to come to the decisions that would come out of the COP, and one in the side event rooms, exhibits, and pavilion space where civil society—non-state actors, such as businesses, researchers, city officials or environmental NGOs—engaged in climate actions, debates, and panels. Though negotiators had to walk through the civil society space to reach the plenary and meeting rooms where their work took place and though we as members of civil society were on occasion able to sit and observe high-level meetings, there appeared to be little interaction between the two.

This division is problematic because those making the decisions do not hear from those on the frontlines of the crisis. Nayoka Martinez Bäckström, First Secretary at the Embassy of Sweden, Dhaka, Bangladesh named the problem in a side event I attended called " Climate Change-Induced Displacement and Migration in Bangladesh," saying that "those holding the pen" don't know what is happening or who to talk to. In that room, we were "all likeminded," convincing each other of things we already believed rather than speaking to those with the power to finance solutions. The talk ended with clear policy prescriptions for what was needed to solve the problems they had addressed, but, at that point, there was nobody in the room to hear them.

Joyce Banda had lost all faith in the UN and similar institutions, and she was not alone. COP29 was nicknamed the "Finance COP," with

its main goal being to agree upon the New Collective Quantified Goals, or NCQGs, to replace the previous USD $100 billion annual number. Their goal was to provide a global finance target to support developing countries in their climate finance needs, supporting them in paying for the damages that wealthier, high-emitting countries caused. The stakes were particularly high given that the previous $100 billion commitment had taken until 2022 to be fulfilled—a full two years after its target date.

Throughout the first week, delegates largely from civil society had participated in actions chanting "climate finance in the trillions not billions" and wearing lanyards reading, "$5 trillion," a message referring to the estimated debt owed to developing countries by high emitting nations. The figure wasn't arbitrary—a report released by the Standing Committee on Finance in 2022 had estimated that developing countries would need $5.8-5.9 trillion for pre-2030 climate action to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.[8] All of the tens of thousands of people attending the COP seemed to be holding their breath waiting for a number to come out.

Late in the second week, the NCQG initial draft came out. The text lacked a quantum—a specific number for how much annual climate finance they would agree upon—and was filled with brackets, a symbol the UNFCCC uses to denote something that is still under negotiation and has yet to be agreed upon. The bracketed sections revealed deep divisions: developing nations advocated for a baseline of at least $1.3 trillion annually by 2030, while developed nations pushed for much lower figures.

When the final draft was published days after the COP was supposed to have ended, the number was strikingly low: USD $300 billion. The global estimated need had been $1.3 trillion, a figure that is still conservative to many activists and leaders from the global South.[9] More troubling still was how this number would be counted—the text included provisions that would allow private finance, loans, and existing development assistance to be counted toward the goal, rather than requiring new and additional public finance as developing countries had demanded.

The consequences of this result cannot be understated. For communities at the frontlines of the climate crisis, this deal will contribute to widespread losses of life and livelihood. It is, as Filipina development worker Tetet Nera-Lauron stated in a LinkedIn post after the fact, a "death sentence... co-written by the #fossilfuel industry, developed countries, the UNFCCC secretariat and the #COP29Azerbaijan presidency."[10] In response to the lack of consensus and the clear favoring of bilateralism, she stated that it "bulldozed whatever semblance of a process there is."

Nera-Lauron is not alone in her anger. In every COP group chat I found myself in, members cried out against both the quantum and the process. Tweets, emails, LinkedIn notifications, and texts read different versions of the same message: people were betrayed, angry, and scared. The "farce," as Nera-Lauron called it in an action outside meeting rooms on the Sunday after COP, amounted to nothing more than crumbs.

The anger stemmed not just from the insufficient number, but from how it was reached. Throughout the negotiations, developed countries had engaged in what many observers called "forum shopping"—bypassing the formal multilateral process in favor of bilateral deals and informal consultations. This approach

[8] Finance, “Second Report on the Determination of the Needs of Developing Country Related to Implementing the Convention and the Paris.”

[9] Rokke, “COP29: Lessons Learned From The UN Climate Change Conference.”

[10] Nera-Lauron, “#COP29 ‘Outcome’ Is NOT a Deal.”

effectively sidelined many of the most vulnerable nations from key decisions about their own futures.

Myra Jackson, our delegation's resident expert on all things UN who attended her 19th COP this year in Baku, stated plainly that, "We've been played." The process in Baku relied heavily on bilateralism that circumvented the prescribed multilateralism and consensus on which the UNFCCC relies. This shift away from consensus-based decision-making represented, for many, a dangerous precedent that could further erode the influence of smaller nations in climate negotiations.

The implications were particularly stark for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who had come to COP29 with clear demands for scaled-up, grant-based public finance. Instead, they left with a commitment that not only fell far short of needed amounts but also failed to address their concerns about over-reliance on private finance and loans that could exacerbate already problematic debt burdens.

As we packed ourselves into the fabricated venue each day, the negotiators deciding between two insufficient quanta of USD 250 or 300 billion, the climate crisis did not pause. As Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, the Chadian indigenous peoples' leader at the interfaith dialogue I attended, said, "Disasters are happening. Right now, people are dying." In Chad, "people are underwater": Over 200 million people are homeless, and thousands are dead from flooding. In the Philippines—the country ranked highest[11] five years running for climate risk—an unprecedented four tropical cyclones[12] made landfall within just 30 days in the month of the conference, affecting over 13 million people. In Panama and Cuba, hundreds of thousands were evacuated when Hurricane Rafael made landfall.[13] The urgency of the climate crisis and the need for these funds are only increasing.

I entered the Baku airport on Saturday after COP feeling defeated. I stood in the line to check my bag with headphones in, downing the water in my new COP29 water bottle in anticipation of the security line. In the line for a flight to Bahrain, my blond-haired self stood out enough that the man behind me asked if I had attended COP. Clearly having arrived straight from the venue, the man, who introduced himself as Bidhan Chandra Pal, was still dressed in a suit jacket and tie. The Bangladeshi activist founded Probha Aurora, a youth-focused climate advocacy and green education group. On the side, he also acted as the national operator for the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)-Bangladesh.

As the line inched forward, we discussed the COP. Chandra Pal was appalled to hear how dismayed I felt by the results. Hope gleaming in his eyes, he told me how encouraged he felt by this year's conference. The smile never left his face as he spoke of the heavy youth engagement, the connections made, the increased emphasis on greening education and health, and the presidency's robust youth volunteer program. He, unlike many people I had spoken with that week, was impressed by Azerbaijan's sustainability commitments and believed that they would fulfill them. He urged me not to get bogged down in grief or

[11] Auer Frege et al., "WorldRiskReport2023."

[12] "Climate Change Supercharged Late Typhoon Season in the Philippines, Highlighting the Need for Resilience to Consecutive Events."

[13] Herdman, "Weather Tracker: Hurricane Rafael Triggers Nationwide Blackout in Cuba: Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua Also Reeling after Fifth Major Hurricane of Season Causes Landslides and Flooding."

frustration; to him, it was essential that youth in particular feel hope about the climate.

Bangladesh, Chandra Pal's home country, is a member of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and, as its membership suggests, faces "severe and increasing climate risks."[14] The 2023 World Risk Index[15] ranked Bangladesh ninth for climate risk, owing largely to rising sea levels and increasingly frequent and severe cyclones. It is estimated that, by 2050, Bangladesh will lose 17% of its territory rising sea levels that threaten coastal and river-side regions, and 13 million people are projected to become internal climate migrants.[16]

Bangladesh has been a leader globally for its local-level adaptation and disaster risk management work, taking drastic measures to successfully reduce cyclone-related deaths "100-fold." But this work done within the country—a country that contributes only 0.4 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions—does not make up for the insufficient action being taken by the highest emitting countries. Despite the best efforts of local NGOs and governments, floods, cyclones, and coastal erosion continue to displace communities. [17]

The resulting internal migration presents several problems. The sparsely populated "Climate Change-Induced Displacement and Migration in Bangladesh" side event I attended addressed some of the non-economic challenges facing Bangladesh. Beyond the obvious economic consequences of losing one's home and relocating to an over-concentrated and under-resourced urban settlement, the panelists detailed non-economic losses and damages abound. Forced out of their fishing livelihoods, many are forced to find new jobs despite a scarcity of openings and a lack of training. These communities, populations burgeoning with each new disaster are generally deemed unsafe, particularly for women and children: They often boast a lack of safe water, poor sanitary conditions, general poor health and frequent illness, rising sexual harassment, and absent social safety nets. The homes in these informal settlements are heat chambers, lacking ventilation and light, and are often rented under the table, prompting fears of eviction. Many regions are also seeing an increase in child marriage. Families, having been forced to move as many as four times in as many years, often see child marriage as a method of "risk transfer": rather than having to tote around another mouth to feed, parents can marry their young daughters off to people with consistent food and a home to offer. In sum, Bangladesh, much like Malawi, is paying the price for sins it did not commit.

During our mutual layover in Bahrain, Chandra Pal gifted me a clay turtle figurine, a woven wallet, and a book of poems he had written. The book, entitled The People Will Rise Again, is a "call to everyone to rise up once again for nature against transgressions."[18] It takes a hopeful tone, noting the beauty of Bangladesh, the injustices waged against its land and people, and, finally, the power of the people to rise up.

In Chandra Pal's words, "It is hard to breathe now".[19] Yet he finds hope. His hope lies not necessarily in the systems, the motivations of which he questions,[20] but in the people themselves. He has faith that the people can dry their tears and use the hurt—the fury—of the

[14] Mahbub and Chung, "Urgent Climate Action Crucial for Bangladesh to Sustain Strong Growth."

[15] Veer, "Climate Change Exposes Bangladesh to Greater Risk."

[16] Veer

[17] Mahbub and Chung

[18] Chandra Pal, *The People Will Rise Again*.

[19] Chandra Pal, 60.

[20] Chandra Pal, 63.

crimes committed against them to drive change. As he professes,

Tears have clustered and turned hearts into stones,

Bearing pain in silence, this world is searing in defiance

So, people will rise again, throbbing and thrusting,

Standing against transgression.[21]

Chandra Pal did not view COP29 as a failure. On the contrary, he pointed out to me some of the conference's many successes. As he notes, the people, when banded together, have the power to "rise up with humanity and conscience" to bring "life…back" from "city to village" and "mountain to lagoon."[22]

Chandra Pal is not alone in this sentiment of faith in the people at COP29. On day six of the conference, I visited the Regional Climate Pavilion for a talk on the philanthropic structure of climate finance led by a consortium of philanthropic funds run by and for the Global South called Alianza Fondos del Sur. After a quick simulation on effectively implementing project funds, we sat down in a circle and Florentina, an indigenous woman from Ecuador, spoke to her experience at COP29.

In her village, accessible only by plane or boat, the work women are expected to do is getting increasingly dangerous as the climate warms. Florentina has spent years fighting for the security of the local forest and confronting violence and insecurity for her community but had felt isolated in this work, both physically and socially. A Costa Rica-based philanthropic organization called Fondo Tierra Viva had noticed her work, however, and funded some of her projects in her community, even badging her and flying her out to Baku. Her words, translated from her indigenous dialect into Spanish, affirmed the goals of COP. Locking eyes with her translator, she shared that she had thought she was alone in confronting climate change but now, surrounded by tens of thousands of people from around the globe purportedly fighting for the same goal she was, she felt a sense of kinship and solidarity. She paused and looked at each of us around the circle, most wearing headphones to translate the Spanish into their own languages. Together, she said, we can make the world turn and listen to what is being asked in these spaces.

The type of broad uprising Florentina and Chandra Pal suggest here, though perhaps ambitious, is not unheard of in UNFCCC spaces. Filippino historian and UNFCCC Board of the Peoples Survival Fund member, Renato Redentor Constantino, writes about one such instance. In 2015, he wrote in his essay entitled "How the Ants Moved the Elephants in Paris," powerful countries in the Global North attempted to stifle ambition and ignore science by gearing towards a two-degree Celsius warming limit for the now-famous Paris COP21 text despite 1.5 degrees being the agreed-upon "maximum allowable rise in average global temperatures." [23] The half-degree gap here represented, for many developing countries, the "difference between survival and annihilation." [24]

Countries belonging to the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Climate Vulnerable

[21] Chandra Pal, 20.

[22] Chandra Pal, 21.

[23] Renato Redentor Constantino, "How the Elephants Moved the Ants in Paris" in *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, ed. Rebecca Solnit (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2023), 73.

[24] Renato Redentor Constantino, 74.

Forum (CVF) rose up against "tremendous efforts" to keep the 1.5 number in the text.[25] By exacting a global campaign convening senior ministers from across the Global South and leveraging various groups' optics-oriented desires to ally with developing states, the "ants moved the elephants" and the gavel landed in favor of the "ultimately doomed" threshold of 1.5 degrees celsius.[26]

At COP29, the people rose to get civil society in the doors in Baku. In a note in the COP29 observer handbook, UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell noted that the number of observer badges would be reduced, a decline he blamed on a "reduction of space."[27] He claimed that the decreased quantity would be doled out in a "more balance[d]" manner in the "spirit of global solidarity," a largely celebrated move to include more observers from the generally underrepresented Global South. This motive was questioned, however, when civil society organizations (CSOs) from these countries did not seem to see an increase in badge allowances: rather, it seemed, all of civil society—and, notably, nations that have expressed disapproval of Russia's actions in Ukraine—had seen reductions.[28]

The elephants—as Redentor Constantino would say—had played their cards right, leaving the ants with insufficient space to pressure negotiators, share their knowledge, network, and represent unheard voices. But, in what Australian PhD candidate Isabelle Zhu-Maguire calls "a testament to the fortitude of civil society," the people rose above. My own ten-person delegation, who initially was awarded only one badge, traded and maneuvered with other organizations until all eight student delegates were badged for at least 11 days.[29] Other Early Career Researchers (ECRs) I met in a post-COP29 virtual debrief had similar experiences: one had been badged by four different organizations during her time at COP and another noted that she had emailed the designated contact persons (DCPs) of over four hundred observing delegations in order to compile her badges for the conference. The people had banded together, utilizing a sprawling network of observing delegations to get people past the open-access green zone and into the rooms where decisions were being made.

Some of the more seasoned veterans of COP—anthropologists Naveeda Khan (2023) and Sarah Hautzinger, to name two—don't identify with the term 'hope.' It feels naive and, in some ways, complacent. But the type of hope that Chandra Pal and Redentor Constantino talk about is not a passive, complacent hope. Their hope is a catalyst, one that allows representatives of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) to pressure "the powerful" into adopting the necessary 1.5-degree warming limit. To them, hope is "complicated but necessary," a way to "embrace uncertainty" without succumbing to "defeat and despair."[30]

This paper does not intend to answer in any conclusive manner the question of whether COP is still viable in its current format or whether no deal would have been better than a bad deal. It intends, rather, to examine the ways that hope, and dismay presented themselves at COP29 in the crucial two weeks that exposed the flaws in our existing systems. It intends, too,

[25] Renato Redentor Constantino, 73.

[26] Renato Redentor Constantino, 73, 80.

[27] Stiell, "Observer Handbook for COP29 3008."

[28] Hautzinger, "CC's 'Badge Boogie' at COPs."

[29] Hautzinger, 2024.

[30] Redentor Constantino, 80.

to highlight some of the positives at a time when it is so easy to get stuck in grief. At this moment when the UNFCCC process as a whole has come into question, we can either use our disappointments, frustrations, and hopes to galvanize a seismic shift in global climate action or sit, complacent, stewing in our fury. Our loyalty must lie with the planet and its inhabitants rather than with an institution.

The words Redentor Constantino drafted in 2015 still ring true today: "The obstacles to action are essentially purely political." [31] As we near COP30 and reflect on the failures of COP29, we must keep in mind the successes of the COP and the power of the people. But we must listen, too, to the voices telling us we are not doing enough.

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Toward the End of Arctic Exceptionalism

Navigating the Intersection of Geopolitics, Climate, and Indigenous Rights at COP29

Ashley Entwistle

I. Introduction

As the doors close on the 29th United Nations Climate Summit, climate activists around the world are left with a sense of disillusionment. The $300 billion climate finance agreement fell far short of the $1.3 trillion that developing countries demanded, leaving communities on the front lines of the climate crisis feeling increasingly frustrated with and excluded from international legislation and collaboration.

Turning our attention northward to the Arctic, the ramifications of this COP will be evident. The acceleration of sea ice melt is pushing the window of opportunity to prevent irreversible damage to the cryosphere further out of reach. Last year, COP28 concluded with a mixed bag of outcomes for polar regions and their communities. On a positive note, the final text included language on "ethical and equitable engagement with Indigenous peoples in global climate policy making," aligning with the recommendations of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), a multinational organization representing 185,000 Inuit from Alaska to Chukotka (ICC 2023). However, Arctic Indigenous peoples were excluded from other critical discussions, such as loss and damage. Talks surrounding the phase-out of fossil fuels were not urgent enough for preventing irreversible ice-sheet melt, and the cryosphere was given less attention at COP28 than it had in prior years (Hanlon 2024). This year, as delegates arrived in Baku for COP29, Arctic scientists, Indigenous leaders, and northern intergovernmental forums came determined to place the cryosphere at the center of global climate agendas. Their goal was clear: to achieve better outcomes than those seen at COP28 and make the global community recognize the urgency of Arctic protection.

II. A Spotlight on the Cryosphere

The International Cryosphere Climate Initiative (ICCI) came into COP29 with the intention of working with the global community to express that even a minimal overshoot of the 1.5°C threshold in global warming would not only lead to irreversible ice sheet melt but also cause global damage and destruction. The ICCI directed the Cryosphere Pavilion in partnership with Iceland and Chile – – the co-chairs of the Ambition on Melting Ice High-Level Group (AMI). This group works to ensure that cryosphere issues are prioritized on the agendas of political leaders and recognized by the public, extending the focus beyond the Arctic and Antarctic regions. The ICCI and AMI working groups hosted UNFCCC side-events, ministerial-level discussions, as well as exhibits, panels, and science-policy seminars that worked to bridge the gap between cryosphere science and policy. The State of the Cryosphere presentation was given by Pam Pearson, the director of the ICCI, in numerous constituency meetings throughout the conference, highlighting that "the cryosphere cannot wait." She outlined the serious threats posed by Arctic warming, including the thawing of coastal permafrost, which releases additional methane and carbon into the atmosphere, accelerated melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet, which contributes to rising sea levels, and unpredictable, potentially extreme disruptions to mid-latitude weather patterns (ICCI 2024). Pearson pointed to images of low-lying nations in the global south that would be damaged if the ice-sheet melt continued at this rate: if sea levels rose three meters, Bangladesh would become an island. Similarly, nations like Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, and the Maldives would be largely or entirely submerged. She warned that these changes will result in "loss-and-damage burdens" felt across the globe. ICCI's side event

on November 12, *"A Message from the Frozen World,"* was notably co-organized by Pakistan and Bangladesh — countries that have historically been absent from large-scale discussions on the Arctic and the cryosphere at COP. The event commenced with Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre stating, "The researchers are clear: Changes to the frozen world impact every living being on the planet." Representatives from Pakistan and Bangladesh discussed local melt of the Hindu Kush Himalayas, which, in addition to general sea-level rise, has led to flooding and internal displacement — leading to several more issues, including sexual violence, disease, and loss of social safety nets. The event concluded with the signing of the AMI by Germany and Palau, signaling a shared commitment and collective responsibility for the future of sea ice and subsequent sea level rise.

Each evening during the second week at the Cryosphere Pavilion, organizers brought the day to a close with a meditation for the cryosphere, guided by meditation teachers from the Brahma Kumaris, based in Hyderabad, Sindh. This practice formed collective awareness and a sense of responsibility toward these fragile regions, even among COP attendees who felt like these regions were so distant.

III. An Emerging Arctic Voice on the Global Stage

In Baku, however, not all were working together to limit the earth's warming to 1.5°C in dialogue to protect the Arctic; rather, some focused on an opportunity to increase international cooperation in a region that is becoming easier to exploit. Azerbaijan is uniquely positioned as a COP host, given its historical and present relations with Russia. The impacts of this relationship were seen in this year's COP, where Russia exerted considerable influence in shaping Arctic representation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, of which Azerbaijan was a part of from 1922 to 1991, Russia and Azerbaijan emerged as independent states. It was only when Putin rose to power in 2000 that military cooperation was established again between Azerbaijan and Russia (Aslani 2010). From the Russian perspective, securing relations with Azerbaijan would serve as a gateway to the West, and would be strategically important for accessing the broader Caucasus region (Aslani 2010). In addition to their geopolitical alliance, the two countries have become partners in the energy sector. As European Union members seek to diversify their energy sources and reduce their dependence on Russian energy, Azerbaijan has emerged as a key alternative supplier of energy. At the same time, Azerbaijan has begun importing energy from Russia, as its own energy production is primarily directed toward exports (Gavin 2024). This complex relationship explains the geopolitical and economic factors that shaped certain discussions on Arctic policy at COP29.

Throughout history, the Arctic has been a region where global powers cooperate, in spite of tensions that may have otherwise existed between the states. This phenomenon is known as "Arctic exceptionalism" (Devyatkin 2023). COP29 was the first year that the Arctic Pavilion was granted pavilion space at a COP. This is largely due to the Pavilion's Russian influence and Azerbaijan's role in determining pavilion allocations, as the host country works with the UNFCCC Secretariat to decide which entities receive pavilion space. The Arctic Pavilion was managed by the Northern Forum, which is chaired in the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug-Yugra, an oil-rich region in Western Siberia. Currently, the Northern Forum includes 12 official member regions: 10 Russian oblasts (provinces), along with the state of Alaska and Gangwon Province in South Korea – – an unusual assembly with a notable absence of countries that actually have territory in the Arctic. The Northern Forum's mission is to "improve the quality of life of Northern peoples and support sustainable development of the regions," and has historically acted in similar

ways to the Arctic Council, which is the Arctic's primary diplomatic venue comprising the eight Arctic states and regional Indigenous groups.

Over the course of the events I attended at the Pavilion, I had the chance to engage in conversations with Vladimir Vasilev, the executive director of the Northern Forum. It was clear that Russia came to dominate this intergovernmental organization in the wake of the Russian War on Ukraine. In protest of the conflict, northern states with Arctic territories, excluding Alaska, paused their Forum membership, which enabled Russia to assert its hegemony in Arctic representation at COP29. This situation mirrors the broader geopolitical shift where the seven other Arctic states condemned Russia's actions and suspended the work of the Arctic Council, leading to a three-year hiatus for the Arctic Council and effectively ending what scholars had long described as "Arctic exceptionalism" (Devyatkin 2023). Vasilev expressed frustration with the lack of cooperation across Arctic states since 2022.

I asked what drew Vasilev to this work. As a native Sakha from the Sakha Republic in northeastern Siberia, Vasilev "fell in love" with the Arctic at an early age. He has seen the region's transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union and understands that international cooperation is necessary for future protection of the region. Because of this, Vasilev was the force behind the Sakha Republic joining the Northern Forum. Now, the weight of the Forum is left on his shoulders and those of his compatriots.

With the six other Arctic countries opting to disengage from the Forum, Russia turned its focus southward, looking to reshape the future of the Arctic at COP. Vasiliev acknowledged the unfortunate reality of being isolated from the other Arctic countries but expressed optimism about collaborating with the global South — seeing COP29 as a platform to do so.

In a panel on the Environmental Safety of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), Professor Bijoy Nandan, from the Cochin University of Science and Technology in India, spoke on behalf of the Global South, saying that the region is invested heavily in NSR exploration. As sea ice melts, the NSR is opening at a fast rate. This Arctic passage connects the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, cutting transit time by 40% compared to the Suez Canal route (Xu and Yu 2022). Nandan stated "this route is going to open up and become a global institution," and praised Russia, particularly the Northern Forum, in working to open the NSR, emphasizing its potential for future collaboration and economic prosperity among countries.

Not all discussions at the Arctic Pavilion were shaped by this new vision for the region; many talks were marked by disagreement and hostility. On the same panel, Halldor Johannsson, director of the Arctic Portal in Iceland, expressed concerns about the Northern Sea Route (NSR), stating, "What happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic." He emphasized the serious environmental risks associated with the route and pointed out that the Arctic Council, the governing body tasked with ensuring environmentally conscious and inclusive decision-making, remains dormant, thus hindering efforts to fully understand the potential consequences of the NSR's rapid opening. In a talk one day prior, "Revitalizing International Cooperation in the Arctic" Paul Fuhs, from Alaska, talked about Arctic warming as being a naturally occurring factor, stating that "we are just about at the ice age level." Terry Callaghan from Great Britain responded saying "I disagree with almost everything you just said," causing the two to bicker for the remainder of the panel.

IV. Indigenous Knowledge and the Arctic at COP29

As Arctic states looked South at COP29, Arctic Indigenous groups

showed disappointment with the nations where they reside. The ICC has been involved with the UNFCCC process since its inception. Going into COP29, the ICC's recommendations included access to climate finance, full participation in decision-making processes, a just transition to alternative energy sources, and the utilization of indigenous knowledge in policy making (ICC 2024). Sara Olsvig, the international director of the ICC, came to the conference with the intention of fighting for these goals. Olsvig spoke at "A Message from the Frozen World," where she acknowledged that the lack of sea ice affects Inuit "health, wellbeing and livelihoods" directly impacting "collective and individual rights." The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples serves as a tool for incorporating Indigenous knowledge into UN frameworks, and yet the UN continues to fail at implementing its own language into the final texts of COP29 negotiations.

Olsvig highlighted Inuit concerns about the transition to clean energy, emphasizing that "it will not be a just transition" when 54% of the minerals required for this shift are found on Indigenous lands (Owen et. al 2023). During COP discussions, the urgency of addressing the climate crisis often overshadows the fact that climate mitigation solutions themselves also have the potential to introduce new environmental impacts, and reinforce existing power structures, as the lands of many Indigenous communities are those that have these minerals. This notion of a 'just transition' was highlighted throughout the conference: on a broader level, it referred to the integration of social equity and sustainability in plans for tackling climate change. At COP29, a High-Level Ministerial Roundtable on Just Transition, as a part of the Just Transition Work Programme, took place, in addition to numerous protests by civil society members and activists advocating for just transition considerations in the negotiating room.

After "A Message from the Frozen World," I had the opportunity to connect with Olsvig, and we realized we had both attended the Alaska Federation of Natives Annual Convention in Anchorage, Alaska, just a month prior to COP. At the convention, Alaska Natives were grappling with how to navigate and support a just transition, a conversation that was interrupted for many when storms hit their villages, forcing them to leave the forum early – – a demonstration of climate change in real time. At COP, Olsvig worked to bring these concerns about just transitions and the integration of Indigenous perspectives into policy discussions. She engaged in high-level conversations with the COP presidency and the UNFCCC Secretary-General, while also speaking with various constituencies about the need for greater recognition of Indigenous voices in climate action.

On the second day of the Summit, the Canadian Pavilion hosted an Indigenous Leadership Day, where a talk entitled "Centering Indigenous Knowledge and Leadership in Mitigation and Adaptation: Examples from the Arctic," was moderated by Anne Simpson, policy advisor for the ICC. The panel featured Paul Irngaut, Vice-President of Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., Rodd Laing, Director of Environment for the Nunatsiavut Government, and Per-Olaf Nutti, President of the Sámi Council representing Indigenous peoples across Sápmi — a region that stretches across the Scandinavian Peninsula and large parts of the Kola Peninsula. Each panelist discussed the importance of Indigenous knowledge in Arctic policy. The main issue highlighted by the panelists was that world leaders have routinely failed to effectively listen to these perspectives when constructing climate policy. Laing pointed out that while Canadian officials have made performative attempts to engage with Indigenous communities, the knowledge shared has consistently been ignored or sidelined in policy-making processes.

In the context of COP29, the panelists noted that negotiations were focused on addressing the global climate crisis,

while largely neglecting the impact of the crisis facing Arctic Indigenous communities in their own countries. These communities are experiencing the impacts of climate change at a rate 3-4 times faster than the rest of the world, and their very existence is being threatened by the actions of their nation's governments. The $300 billion in climate finance, agreed upon at the end of the conference, does not extend to Arctic Indigenous communities. These communities are excluded from receiving loss-and-damage and adaptation help under the UN climate finance mechanisms that are currently in place, largely because the countries that these Arctic Indigenous communities reside in are those that are considered developed and less vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Additionally, after a series of "frustrating negotiations," COP29 concluded without reaching an agreement or producing any text on the Just Transition Work Programme.

V. The Road to COP30 in Brazil

On the second day of COP29, delegates in the sessions I attended were already discussing expectations and goals for COP30. They were still in Baku for COP29, though their minds were in Belem at COP30. "We cannot skip a COP," stated Beniamin Strzelecki, Youth Climate Advisor to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, in response to this trend in dialogue. "Climate change is not waiting for another COP." This sentiment stands especially true for the Arctic. With CO2 concentrations continuing to rise at an alarming rate, projections show that we could see a 3°C increase in global temperatures by the end of the century. This would mean the Arctic Ocean could be ice-free for nearly 180 days each year (ICC 2024). At COP29, Irngaut, a resident of Nunavut, shared a harsh reality: for the Inuit, "sea ice is our highway." He told stories of neighbors falling through thinning ice and never returning to their families, as seal-hunting seasons shortened due to a warming ocean. The impacts of climate change are already being felt, and the prospect of a 3°C increase is nothing short of terrifying. Despite these testimonies, discussions about the region's economic potential for outsiders continue to dominate, with larger COP negotiations often sidelining the very real human and environmental crises unfolding in the Arctic. The international community must recognize that the stakes for the Arctic are incredibly high, while Arctic states must step up their efforts to protect their regions and people. As Olsvig pointed out, her people have been knocking on the UN's door since it was the League of Nations; it is time for the broader international community to listen.

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The "Hold the Line" COP: "There is no climate justice without gender justice!"

Havalin Haskell

Introduction

COP29, the Conference of the Parties, or the climate conference that brings together world leaders, representatives, and stakeholders from nearly every country annually to negotiate international climate policy, will forever be identified as the "Finance COP." While climate finance was undeniably the central focus of COP29, specifically the New Collective Quantified Goal for climate finance (NCQG), it wasn't solely the "Finance COP." It should also be known as the "Hold the Line" COP.

While disappointment with the lack of ambition and continued neglect of justice within climate finance has been the main discussion point of COP29, arguably just as alarming was the extreme backlash against the integration of gender, intersectionality, and human rights language across negotiation rooms, including the Women and Gender negotiations on the Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG) and Gender Action Plan (WGC 2024;Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security 2024).

The deeply concerning push back from some Parties against making a robust, collective commitment to gender equality within climate negotiations and frameworks reflects a troubling resurgence of anti-rights and anti-gender movements (WGC 2024). Around the world, human rights are being violated, and commitments to gender equality and diversity continue to be systematically eroded. These movements are deeply connected to the spread of authoritarianism and the entrenched systems of power driving the climate crisis and worsening gender inequalities (Women and Gender Constituency 2024).

I boarded the plane for COP29 amidst the shock born from the reality of the United States' 2024 election results and its countless implications, especially for my rights and identity as a woman. There is no doubt that Trump's electoral win, especially over a female candidate, and the looming reality of his new term will continue to embolden a new wave of sexism, racism, transphobia, and climate change denialism.

The blatant attempts to eliminate reference to the protection of environmental human rights are especially distressing given that women are on the frontlines of the climate crisis, bearing disproportionate impacts of climate change while simultaneously playing a critical role in advancing climate action and actual transformative solutions (Johnson and Wilkerson 2020; UN Women 2024).

It is more important than ever to advance an ambitious climate action agenda, and that fundamentally rests upon centering the needs and leadership of women, particularly in highly vulnerable and conflict-affected areas (Charbit 2018: UN Women 2024). Gender equity remains absolutely critical for global climate action, not just for the sake of fairness, but for true effectiveness (Charbit 2018: Johnson and Wilkerson 2020).

This year's COP29 highlighted the unwavering commitment of feminist leaders and activists to achieving not just climate progress, but climate justice. Feminists and allies fought tirelessly for an ambitious work program on gender, having to overcome significant pushback from some countries to include language on gender equality and human rights across the board in negotiations (WCG 2024 : Stallard 2024).

As the Woman and Gender Constituency's motto states: "There is no climate justice without gender justice" (WGC 2024). In light of the neglect of human rights language in the outcomes of this specific COP, there is especially no climate justice without the centering of basic human rights. The integrity of human rights and gender equality should be non-negotiable. COP29 should work to strengthen rights, rather than question them and weaken them.

Disproportionate Impacts of Climate Change on Women and Girls

The climate crisis is not "gender neutral." For more than a decade, it has been acknowledged by countries globally that women face a disproportionate burden from climate change, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety (UN Women 2024).

For example, a study done by UN Women, found that by 2050 close to 160 million women and girls globally may be pushed into poverty as a direct result of climate change, and, by 2050 close to 240 million more women and girls will face food insecurity caused by climate change compared to 131 million more men and boys (UN Women 2024). This is often due to their care-centered roles, interruption of access to reproductive services during climate disasters, and the fact that women bear a disproportionate responsibility for securing food, water, and fuel (UN Women 2024)(Van Deelen et. al 2024). Climate change is a "threat multiplier" in that it intensifies social, political and economic tensions, causing women and girls to face increased vulnerabilities to all forms of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, human trafficking, child marriage, and other forms of violence (UN Women 2024).

One of the most impactful side events I attended was called "Funding at the intersection of climate and health: unlocking investments for women and girls to build resilience and leave no one behind," put on by the MSI Reproductive Choice Foundation, Margaret Pyke Trust Foundation and PSI. This event elucidates just one example of how women and girls are disproportionately impacted by climate change. As the moderator, Carina Hirsch, Head

of Advocacy and Policy for the Margaret Pyke Trust said when introducing the panel, "We are here to talk about women and girls, who face the harshest and most violent effects of climate change."

The side event focused on the linkage between on the ground impacts of climate change and sexual reproductive health rights (SRHR). It's a cyclical relationship: as climate change accelerates, sexual reproductive health risks increase, access to SRHR resources decreases because funding goes toward disaster mitigation, and then fewer women are empowered and able to be a part of climate action, creating a "perfect storm on the ground." A study in Bangladesh referred to in the talk found that there has been a 20% increase in preeclampsia cases due to the salinization of groundwater, a direct impact of climate change.

Nakando Simamuna, Technical Advisor at MSI Zambia, spoke about her work on the ground in Zambia, where the "health system has been challenged and weakened in various ways" due to the acceleration of climate changes, especially in sexual reproductive health infrastructure. She further explained how as agriculturally dependent Zambian villages get hit with the pendulum swing of droughts and flooding, food insecurity has caused a rise in adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

Carina Hirsch, the moderator emphasized the importance of noting that women are responsible for roughly half of the world's food production, and in most developing countries they produce between 60 and 80% of the food. Yet globally, the prevalence of food insecurity is higher among women than men. This statistic is confirmed by FAO and USDA.

Simanua further described how Zambian girls are increasingly "having sex with older boys and men for money or food," as it is their only way to avoid starving. Additionally, progress on lowering the instances of child marriage has been marred by the climate crisis; Simamuna explained how girls are married off by their families even sooner and at higher numbers to lower the number of mouths to feed in families and to garner more income from the marriage.

Hafsat Abiola-Costello, President of Women and Africa Initiative and Co-founder of Project Dandelion, built off of this, grounding the trends within a story about a young girl she worked with from a nomadic group in her village. The girl was able to go to primary school and worked her way all the way to high school, however support from her family to finish her high school degree was stunted when they wanted her to get married as her village got hit by another drought- she was sixteen. Then, she ended up getting pregnant in school by an older man who raped her. However, through the presence of a sexual reproductive health clinic near her high school, with an intentionally all female staff, she was able to receive a safe abortion. She went on to finish higher education to the point where she was able to work her way to working for the United Nations, specifically for climate change mitigation. This story shared by Abiola-Costello illuminates how not only climate impacts reduce the sexual reproductive rights of women and girls, but how that lack of access to reproductive health care works as a barrier to women participation within climate action, such as governance and policy avenues.

Representation and Historical Context Leading Up to COP29

A critical examination of representation, specifically gender composition within conferences, reveals a persistent and concerning disparity: Analysis from the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), shows that 34% of Party delegates at COP28 were women, and fewer than one in five Heads of Delegation (19%) were women, a percentage that has been historically unchanging (WEDO 2024). Data from UN Women, an entity of the UN dedicated to gender equality, shows that 35% of delegates at COP29 were women (UN Women 2024). A member of the Women

and Gender Constituency within the technology negotiations told me that "technology negotiations are specifically dominated by men, and at this COP, representation was only improved by increasing women delegates to 5% women." A more recent study found that in 2023 at COP28, 143 (73%) of 195 Party delegations were still majority men, and only 31 (16%) of 195 showed gender parity (Van Daaleen et. al. 2024)

The COP29 Presidency specifically set the stage for a gender-equity adverse COP context. The COP Presidency for each conference selects members for an organizing committee to assist in running and leading the conference. The COP29 Presidency's original organizing committee blatantly ignored gender equality, selecting exclusively men to positions. The COP29 Azerbaijani Presidency only added 12 women after the initial 28-man composition of the organizing committee was condemned for being "shocking and unacceptable" (Reed 2024).

The lack of equity across gender within the COP is in direct conflict with two Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 5 (Gender Equality) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities). The disproportionate impact of climate change on women, coupled with the persistent disparities in decision-making bodies, calls for a critical examination of the link between representation and climate policy outcomes and motivated my research heading into COP29. It also speaks to the sheer hypocrisy of the COP conference itself, not even upholding the Sustainable Development Goals it strives to use as guides.

I went to COP29 with a specific focus for my research being gender as its broadly construed within COP29 and within these background contexts. I initially sought to research and examine the following questions: What is the state of gender representation broadly at COP29? What is the impact of female presence and participation within COP29, especially negotiation spaces? What are the implications of gender disparities in representative parties at COP meetings on the efficacy and implication of gender-focused environmental policy outcomes?

However, these questions evolved to also include: What is feminist climate justice and why does it matter? What is the Women and Gender Constituency's presence like at COP29? How is the WGC's presence received on the ground at COP29? What is it like to be a young woman myself on the ground at COP29? What are some of the most impactful women-led solutions?

For two and a half weeks at COP29, I conducted an ethnographic exploration of all these questions swirling around in my head. I closely followed the WGC, The Women and Gender Constituency, and side events, negotiations, and press releases surrounding gender-specific topics, not only to answer these questions through the information presented, but also through observing gender dynamics within each COP29 space, such as body language, tone, the quality of listening and ability to speak up, balance of discussion, types of discussion tactics. In addition, I conducted interviews with women attendees and delegates, to gain deeper insights into their experiences, perspectives, and challenges related to gender representation and policymaking within COP meetings.

Overall, I walk away from COP29 with not only a broader understanding, appreciation for feminist climate justice, and empowerment from that, but also with disheartening shock. To be a woman at COP29 was to be on edge all the time. The nuances of assault against my identity as a woman reverberated in the halls of the venue--across my personal interactions, within the stories of climate discrimination, through the gender dynamics within all COP29 spaces, and within the bleak negotiation outcomes.

What is Feminist Climate Justice and the WGC?

The Women and Gender Constituency (WGC) is one of the nine stakeholder groups of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and consists of 52 women's and environmental civil society organizations working together to ensure that women's voices are heard and their rights are prioritized in climate action (Gordon et. al. 2024; WGC 2024).

Ever since the Earth Summit in 1992, the United Nations has been working with governments and civil society to tackle climate change, and the UN hosted the first ever Conference of the Parties (COP) in Berlin, Germany in 1995 (UNFCCC 2024). However, it wasn't until 2009 that the WGC was established, and it wasn't granted full constituency status until 2011, at COP17 (Gordon et. al 2024).

The WGC promotes human rights and gender equality through advocating for the full and effective participation of women at all levels of the decision-making process as well as a gender-responsive approach in all policies and actions related to climate change (Gordon et al, 2024). Ultimately, the WGC "provides a voice to women to formalize and unify the perspectives of women and gender civil society" within the UNFCCC processes (Gordon et. al 2024). The Women and Gender Constituency "wants feminist climate justice--and when do we want it? Now!" to echo one of the central chants we would project throughout the venue.

What is feminist climate justice? In essence, feminist climate justice boils down to seeking a world where everyone can flourish on a healthy and sustainable planet (WGC 2024). Feminist climate justice advocates for strategies to address the root causes of inequality in relation to climate action, promoting the necessary transformation away from the fossil-fuel capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy and white supremacy that drive both the climate crisis and rampant inequality (WEDO 2024)(WGC 2024). As Mara from WEDO stated at an event in the Just Transition Pavilion about centering gender within a just transition, "A feminist analysis and approach is about a transformative vision of a just transition."

A feminist approach to climate justice addresses the issue of climate change as a complex social issue through an intersectional analysis that challenges unequal power relations based on gender and other characteristics, such as socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, nationality, ability, sexual orientation, and age (WEDO 2024). It also recognizes the leadership of women, girls, and gender-diverse people in driving the change that is so urgently needed (WGC 2024).

I went to a couple of powerful events organized by the Women and Gender Constituency throughout my time at COP29 centered around "imagining what a feminist, climate-just future looks like." The first event surrounding this exercise was called "Feminist Grounding and Imagining" on Monday of week two in the Blue Zone and the event was such a contrast to all the experiences I had had at COP29 so far— it was ultimately a microcosm of what a feminist climate justice approach looks like, marked by community solidarity, collaboration, and empowerment.

In the imagining exercise, we all sat in a large circle, about 30 women and me, and were prompted to yell out what a feminist climate just world would have or look like, as the WGC coordinator of the event wrote each word on a pink sticky note to be placed on the wall to create a beautiful word bubble of sorts. Some of the contributions shouted out were: "A seat at the table, Peace, Respect, Intergenerational, sisterhood, cooperation, equity, safe, community, diverse, collective, solidarity, no hunger, abundance, clean water, rights to land, decolonized, organized, liberating, tolerant, kinship with nature, resource ownership, leadership, local knowledge, end of capitalism, sustainability, art everywhere, brave, no wars, ambitious."

One participant stated: "When I think of an ecofeminist world, I envision a benevolent world." The WGC leader of the exercise acknowledged that this exercise might seem futile, "almost silly," especially within the context of COP29. However, she argued, and I would agree, that "these values and hopes need to be in the back of our minds and front of our hearts," not despite the context of COP29, but because of it.

The Efficacy of Women-Led Solutions:

Ayshaka Najib, a prominent climate-justice activist and intersectional feminist I met at COP, brilliantly articulates not only what feminist climate action is, but why it matters broadly: "Promoting and resourcing gender just climate solutions, locally driven especially by women and girls, are not just a matter of survival. Women, girls and gender diverse peoples are at the forefront, leveraging their lived experiences and leadership to build a sustainable, resilient, and sustainable future" (Gordon et. al 2024).

As stated in the introduction of All We Can Save, an anthology of essays and poems highlight a wide range of women's voices in the environmental movement: "Research shows that women have an edge over men when it comes to the planet[…] When women participate equally with men, climate policy interventions are more effective." (Johnson and Wilkson 2020). However, in climate finance, only about 0.01% of all worldwide funding is directed towards projects that address both climate change and women's rights (UNFCCC 2024).

I attended the 9th edition of the Gender Just Climate Solutions Awards Ceremony put on by the WGC and WECF. These solutions provide concrete examples of not only how to center gender equality and women's rights into climate action, but the power and true efficacy of women-led solutions. The frontline climate work of women serves as evidence that climate solutions not only exist, but are effective precisely because they account for, and are meaningfully gender responsive. The selection criteria for solutions highlighted in both the award ceremony and selected to be a part of the Gender Just Solution Awards Publication provide equal access to benefits for women, men, and youth, empower women through enhanced livelihood security, promotes women's democratic rights and participation, are self-sufficient and require a low input of resources, effectively contribute to climate change mitigation, emissions reduction, and climate adaptation, and works towards addressing the interlinkages between cross-cutting issues such as peace-building, natural resources management, food security, health, water, sanitation, etc. And, while they are locally led and locally driven, all the solutions highlighted can be scaled up and are effectively replicable (Gordon et. al 2024).

There were over 343 eligible applications for this award received by the WECF, but only three won across three categories: technical solutions, non-technical solutions, and transformational solutions (Gordon et. al 2024).

The technical solution award was won by an organization called The Little Earth, based in the Yagnob Valley of Tajikistan. The project supports mountain-dwelling women to lead the solar energy transition by training women who previously relied on kerosene and firewood to use and maintain solar devices and other resource efficient technologies. This solution not only has reduced environmental degradation in the fragile ecosystems of the Tajak mountains, but has also improved community health, strengthened women's technical skills, eased these women's unpaid workload, and integrated women into the decision-making at local and national levels in reference to the energy transition (Gordon et. al 2024).

The non-technical solution award was won by Zág Institute in Brazil, which works to save the endemic Araucaria tree, known as the Zág, and preserve the Laklãnõ-Xokleng traditional knowledge in the Brazilian Atlantic

Forest. The organization centers Indigenous women's knowledge and leadership to restore biodiversity and ecosystem protection through ancestral practices (Gordon et. al. 2024).

Lastly, the transformational solutions award was won by the organization, Love the Oceans, based in Janamo Bay, Mozambique. Love the Oceans protects endangered marine life through a community-based, holistic approach involving education, research, campaigning, and professional development building for local jobs and sustainable entrepreneurship. For example, Love the Oceans works to increase young women's literacy and technical skills such as scuba diving. It has trained the first five women swim teachers and lifeguards and certified the first female scuba divers in the area. Love the Oceans also incorporates scalable self-sufficiency and women's economic autonomy through ecosystem restoration in its women-led mussel aquaculture initiative (Gordon et. al 2024).

In order to implement the transformative shift needed to effectively address climate gender- just solutions must be strengthened and scaled up in every country -- this is specifically through the allocation of climate finance towards gender responsive and women-led solutions, such as 343 eligible organizations credible for the Gender Just Climate Solutions. After each award was presented and celebrated, the audience was led in a chant: "Power to the winners because the winners got the power. Tell me, can you feel it getting stronger every hour?" I could feel that power. It got stronger every hour I heard about these solutions. It is a tangible, transformative power. It's a simple yet life changing power.

Personal Experiences on the Ground with Sexual Harassment at COP29

Despite my heightened awareness of gender discrimination and inequality within the COP setting due to my research beforehand, and overall background knowledge within gender and policymaking and governance spheres, I honestly did not expect the day-in, day-out discrimination and sexual harassment my classmates and I would face on the ground at COP29.

For me, the inappropriate interactions began in the Frankfurt airport, while waiting at the gate to board our final plane to Azerbaijan. The gate was full of COP29 attendees, so conversations and introductions ensued as we all waited to board the plane. This one younger man, representing Hawaii and a part of the Youth Constituency quickly came up to our group and introduced himself. He seemed nice and excited to connect with fellow youth attending the conference. Therefore, the whole group and I exchanged numbers and Instagrams with him and even created a group chat on WhatsApp to communicate further. However, this man persistently and exclusively messaged me, on Instagram Direct Messaging and WhatsApp wanting to know where I was in the venue, wanting to meet up, wondering what I was up to at night, wanting to meet up outside the venue to "hang out." Whenever I saw him in the venue, he would immediately give me a nonconsensual, unreciprocated hug, that would last for longer than was appropriate, not that it was even really appropriate in the first place.

Most of my other female classmates found that our interactions with male attendees would devolve into uncomfortable situations like this. Many of the conversations with male attendees would end in them flirting with us, including asking for our numbers and Instagram accounts in an unprofessional manner. In the beginning, because COP29 is ultimately a networking frenzy, my classmates and I would gladly pass on my Instagram or What's App number to connect—as many of the men I first interacted with seemed like they genuinely wanted to connect with me at COP29 in a professional manner. However, this would usually turn into male participants texting in flirtatious ways.

A member of the press from Uganda one day approached my classmate and me as we ate our

lunch and worked on our computers in a side hallway. He persistently wanted to take our photograph with this informational magazine from an organization he was a part of, highlighting their work on the ground in Africa. After asking him questions about the campaign, it seemed like a legitimate reason to allow our photos to be taken. He proceeded to take not just a couple photographs, but a series. My classmate and I anxiously smiled until it became uncomfortable and had to ask him to stop taking the photos, that "Okay, that's enough." A group of his colleagues walked by with their cameras, giving him eyes and thumbs up and egging him on. That is when I realized this wasn't just about taking our photo for his campaign. He then proceeded to sit down next to me, wanting to continue the conversation, which I did, out of politeness, I guess. While at first it was an engaging conversation, just like the photographs, it quickly became uncomfortable.

"You are just so beautiful and young…these photos are so beautiful," he said. I had to prompt him three times to leave: "Well, it was nice meeting you, hope you have a great rest of COP." By the third time, I used a stronger tone, and he finally left.

Every single time— I mean every single time—I would go to sit down and work on my computer in between sessions or eat my lunch, without fail a man would come and sit down right next to me, usually working his way to infringe on my personal space bubble, trying to ask me about my age, continuing to converse with me in a flirtatious manner, not picking up on my body language or verbal cues to leave me alone. After it continued to happen every day, I would end up avoiding sitting down anywhere or try to find a hidden corner.

The last straw for me was when I sat in a tight corner between a corner and a water filler stand. The space was so tight that I had to bend my legs to sit there, with my computer resting on my lap. I thought for sure this would be a place where I wouldn't be bothered. But no, sure enough a man came and squeezed right in between my feet and the water jug, giving me a big smile as he did so. I just got up right then and left, right as he was about to utter his first words to me.

We even were "chirped" or inappropriately called out by workers at COP29. One of my female classmates described how one day, she and two other classmates (also women), were approached by a couple of "guys, they looked like technicians or workers at COP29." She recounted how they started to converse with these men, thinking it was another professional interaction. However, they quickly realized this was not the case after they answered that they were students attending COP29 from the United States. One of the men said, with a flirtatious smirk on his face, "College girls from America are so beautiful" and referring to one of the women, "Your eyes are so beautiful."

"The men then asked 'So, Instagram?'" my classmate explained. "We pushed it off, it was so disappointing. I remember being like while we are here as a delegation, trying to learn, to observe, these men think they can just flirt with us?"

While my experiences were primarily micro-aggressions that where simply uncomfortable and unprofessional—my fellow classmate experienced more aggressive sexual harassment, specifically from a man reportedly on a Brazilian Party badgewhen taking the COP29 bus back to our hotel. He not only flirted with her, saying inappropriate things, but coerced her into giving him her number. For example, he asked her how old she was, saying he was forty-eight and lucky to be talking to such a beautiful young lady. When she gave him a fake number, he clearly had studied her COP29 badge with her name and looked her up in Whats App to find her real number. He pressured her to come to dinner with him and when she refused, followed her to where she was meeting the rest of our class for dinner. He proceeded to overwhelm her with text messages and stalking behavior.

Both of us went to our professors that night, as this experience of heightened severity was the turning point in which all these micro-aggressions snowballed into true fear. Our professors submitted a Title IX report through the Colorado College office, however, in terms of how to report to the UNFCCC, it remains unclear and difficult to track down a reporting avenue. [Ed note: found on UNFCCC site following COP29 without difficulty.]

Within the UNFCCC Code of Conduct, sexual harassment is described as "any unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense or humiliation" (UNFCCC 2024). It states that "sexual harassment may involve any conduct of a verbal, nonverbal or physical nature, including written and electronic communications, and may occur between persons of the same or different genders," including behaviors such as "staring in a sexually suggestive manner." However, the complaint process lacks specific links to fill out a report and vaguely states that any participant who feels that they have been harassed at a UNFCCC event may report the matter, and that "reports can be made to the designated office(s) or email address that will be indicated by UNFCCC for each specific event" (UNFCCC 2024).

But what if it happens in the hallway or online or not at a specific event? Where does one email or file a report? After much digging on the website, it is not clear at all. This is infuriating because the UNFCCC should have a reporting system in order to clearly track the magnitude, spectrum, and quantity of sexual harassment experiences at COP29, and because in the absence of such a system, people are even more inclined to remain silent about their harassment experiences, and disregard them as not so serious.

However, my classmate and I were even hesitant to report, not just because of the difficulty in figuring out how to do so, but also because of the fear that if the perpetrator got wind of the report, they would perhaps still be present in the venue and have a reason to seek to confront her. That is the reason why I would continually practice a baseline of politeness to these men inappropriately reaching out to me, due to the fear that if not, I would continue to see them at the venue, and they would get more aggressive. My classmate also had hesitations reporting the negotiator who stalked her out of concern that he was from a developing country and to diminish the representation of that delegation would be a hindrance to developing countries' presence.

Overall, especially considering that COP29 is a male dominated space—with only a stagnant 30-32% of attendees being women across COP history--the mounting nature of micro-aggressions my classmates and I experienced really infringed on my ability to engage with the networking process and overall conference proceedings (WEDO 2024; UN Women 2024). Uncomfortable interaction after uncomfortable interaction led me to walk around the venue on edge—not wanting to strike up or reciprocate any conversation with a male attendee.

There were days when I didn't want to go to COP29 or started to subconsciously, and then consciously choose the clothing I bought that was less feminine to wear to the venue. I stopped putting on my tinted lipstick. I wore my blazers and pant suits, but never my formal skirt. It felt like if I did, the already limited respect and credibility I had at COP29 being young, solely an observer, and a woman would be eroded even more.

Interviews with Women Delegates

One day, when I was not badged for the Blue Zone, I decided to pursue some self-care. I was feeling distraught, heavy with emotional reckoning, and the impulse to go get my haircut brought me to Bella Monde salon. Spending two hours in Bella Monde Salon happened to be so healing. The solidarity and kinship I felt in the salon, connecting with the local Azerbaijani hairdressers was similar to that I felt when among the Women and Gender Constituency at

COP29. The tenderness, care, and support of the women I met along the way was pivotal for softening my grief and shock of the conference. It was also a pivotal experience because a woman negotiator from Liberia sat down next to me to also get her nails done.

My goal with my research was to, of course, interview and connect with women delegates and attendees at COP29 to hear about their experiences—and I never would have expected that this would take place primarily outside of the COP venue walls in serendipitous encounters. The separation was essential to garnering a true connection with these women. These interactions weren't interviews, but more conversations—not marred by the stress, rush, and professionalism of the conference. Separated from the mayhem of COP, these women were able to really open up, speak off the cuff, and authentically answer my questions in a relaxed manner. It was almost a sacred space.

The delegate from Liberia, as she got her nails painted a shade of magenta, explained how she was one of only seven women of a delegation of fifty for Liberia at COP29. And she remarked, these seven women's attendance was monumental, as it's only been in the past couple of COPs that women have even been sent as a part of Liberia's delegation. I asked her if that was because of structural barriers within Liberia preventing women from entering high level positions and spaces within government and policy that would bring them then to COP29. She answered by saying yes. However, she also said even as women do hold more governmental positions, such as in the Liberia Environmental Protection Agency, and are qualified to attend COP29, the Liberian government has limited funding to send delegates to COP29. Therefore, the government prioritizes sending men as representatives and negotiators because "They believe their money will go further and that the men will be more successful in the negotiations for the country." I then asked her how gender representation within negotiations rooms was in her experience and the realities of being a woman delegate within negotiation rooms.

"Well, the majority of women delegates that are at COP are concentrated in the Women and Gender negotiation rooms," she quickly stated. She explained how being a woman delegate at COP is challenging on many levels: "It's so hard to speak up…your voice gets stifled a lot…and it's hard to be taken seriously." She was so curious to hear how I got to be badged as a student at COP29, and she explained how it's so hard to not only get her country to send women but students to COP29, especially due to lack of funding. She continued to remind me how much of a privilege and opportunity it was for me to be a COP29 and how she hopes to advocate for students to come from her country and Africa in general.

Later that day, the trend of serendipity continued, and I met two more women delegates when gathering my clothes at the laundromat. I first started chatting with Libsy, a woman delegate from Panama in the Mitigation Work Programme negotiations. As we sorted our socks from our t-shirts, she explained how "the composition of negotiations stays the same each year," in that "the only female delegates are in the women and gender negotiations." Women, when a COP29 are all "concentrated" in that one negotiation space, and that in the "finance and transparency rooms, there are almost no women." She further explained that for women like her, who have gained a seat at the table, it is "hard to be a woman and be heard in those rooms surrounded by men." Then, her colleague and fellow Panamanian delegate came into the laundromat and quickly joined into the conversation. She immediately stuck out her hand to introduce herself to me.

Her name was Mari Castillo and was not only a delegate, but one of the special envoys to the Panamanian President and introduced herself in that way—not in a cocky manner, but in a proud, strong manner. Mari Castillo is also a

lawyer specializing in climate finance and human rights. She currently works with the Climate Action Department in the Climate Change Directorate of the Ministry of the Environment of Panama.

Mari added to Libsy's insights into being a woman negotiator at COP, noting that "The only place where there are female delegates are the women and gender negotiations and those are taken the least seriously." In fact, she modified, "They are seen as an afterthought." Those negotiations are "last on the agenda, the last to even be considered." It's no wonder that the thematic day of gender is historically left to the last day of the conference.

I then asked them—well what do you do to overcome it? How do you navigate being one of the only women in these spaces? "My only way to overcome it is to be extra assertive," Casillo answered. However, Castillo continued to emphasize over and over that as a woman in the COP space, "You really have to be extra cautious." She delivered this insight as a piece of strong advice to me, knowing that I was attending COP29. Her eyes reflected a type of concern for me, and I could tell she wanted me to know how strong I needed to be every day.

"You have to learn how to dress a certain way, wear certain clothes, make-up and then you can do the job, do the work," she explained. Both women, with a current of frustration, outlined the mental gymnastics that go into each decision, each piece of clothing, each element of body language, each word spoken and in what tone, that goes into being simply heard and shown base level respect.

Castillo explained how these elements of being a woman at COP29 and in policy spaces are magnified because she is Latina. "It's especially hard being Latina to be taken seriously, having my accent and pronunciation of English not as clear." Not only does she have to shift her apparel and makeup to be more Western and professional, yet still feminine, but she also has to be "extra careful with every single word that I say and pronounce in order to be taken seriously."

Both women were so willing to answer all my questions, reciprocating with interest in my path to COP29 and wanting to connect further with me in the venue. Castillo was specifically so happy to connect with me and know a group of university students were attending COP. She was quick to offer her number and wanted to meet up in the Blue Zone! She reached out to me via WhatsApp, but despite our efforts, our paths never crossed again. I will never forget not only their insights, but also how they made me feel.

Both women were so willing to answer all my questions, without a single aspect of being rushed or annoyed, reciprocating with interest in my path to COP29 and approaching the conversation with authenticity, humility, and generosity. The interaction was one marked by profound solidarity- woman to woman, climate person to climate person, mentor to eager student.

I will never forget Libsy's last remark: "Now you have seen my underwear, and I have seen yours and see you at the COP." Solidarity at its finest.

I also asked the leaders of the Women and Gender Constituency in a Question-and-Answer section of a small group negotiation what it was like to be a woman, as a woman observer and member of civil society to be in the negotiation rooms and have their voices heard and respected. They echoed first what the other three women delegates told me about the experience of being a woman in negotiating rooms; representation of women is only prevalent in the Women and Gender negotiations and in the other negotiation rooms, it's an upward battle to get your voice respected and heard.

However, they also expanded to explain "how the patriarchy manifests itself in other ways," specifically in that the majority of the

women attending COP29 are also marred with the stress and responsibility of caregiving. "Because of our identities, most of us are also responsible caregivers and caretakers, and there is an incredible amount of effort and fatigue that comes with the aspect of being at COP…That amount of fatigue is not the same in hegemonic roles," one Women and Gender Constituency leader said. She continued to articulate the fact that "Not only are there active barriers, but aspects like this to being a woman on the ground at COP."

Following the Women and Gender Constituency on Gender Justice Day: Solidarity, strength marked by disrespectful male presence.

On Monday, November 18th, the start of the second week of COP29, it was technically the Presidency's thematic day of Human Capital, Children and Youth, Health, and Education at COP29 (UNFCCC 2024). However, it was also Gender Climate Justice Day, as informally determined by the WGC.

The thematic day for gender equality scheduled via the Presidency was set for 21st, looped in with 21 Nature and Biodiversity, Indigenous People, and Oceans and Coastal Zones (UNFCCC 2024). However, one of the heads of the Women and Gender Constituency (WGC), stated, November 18th was organized by the constituency to be Gender Climate Justice Day, because "We don't want it to be left to the final days of COP29…We need to take up space and make our voices heard now!" Make your presence really felt today—that was their main message guiding the day.

Throughout COP, there were "color campaigns," organized across constituencies to show support and solidarity for certain groups and uplift certain elements of the climate crisis: indigenous rights, human rights, gender. On this day, wearing purple signified support for Gender and Young Feminist actions and demands and indeed was COP29 painted in shades of lavender and violet. I wrote in my journal "If three words had to encapsulate the day: Strength, solidarity, and smiles—lots and lots of smiles were shared."

Following the WGC—the energy, passion, positivity generated by its community – the day was pierced through the deep current of frustration, shock, and despondency, not only at the broader mix of contextual forces at play, such as the state of the negotiations, climate projections, current lived realities of those on the frontlines of climate change (especially women and girls), the US election, but also the fact that many of the negotiations are rolling back on gender equity and intersectional language within texts. There was singing, chanting, and lots of laughter. But also, such frustration--shared, collective frustration. The WGC breathes life and energy into every COP29 space where it is present, contrasting the often sterile, emotionally devoid nature of COP29 negotiations and events. But also, WGC experiences generate collective frustration. Standing beside and connecting with elder indigenous women and younger feminist leaders alike, I felt community and positive current that the COP hadn't carried for me the entire time. "The day was so incredibly grounding and uplifting, the embodiment of empowerment!" I wrote.

I first went to the Women and Gender Constituency Daily meeting, which takes place each morning inside event room three. Throughout the entire day, it was quite interesting to observe firsthand, with my heightened gender awareness, how the male presence arose within these WGC events too. I arrived a little late, at around 9:15 rather than the 9:00 start time. There was a COP29 worker, standing outside the door, monitoring who goes in and out, like usual outside the doors. This worker was a tall man, and he stood not beside the door, but right in front of it, with his arms crossed, stance wide. I went up to him and asked if I could go in, and he firmly said no, the room was full, at capacity. As other women started to gather around asking the same question, we all just remained outside the door, hoping to get in.

Eventually, a leader of the WGC came out of the room, and told us we could come in, there is space. The worker firmly said no and continued to block the door. The leader of WCG continued to disagree with the worker and tell him there is enough room, he called over a police officer, who then followed us as we walked in the room. The tension between worker and his insistent need to subvert the power of the WGC leader was palpable. This current of male aversion to the energy around Gender Justice Day continued.

I next followed the Constituency to the Civil Society Hub for an event, imagining Feminist Climate Future. There were only two men present at this event, David and Kit. Kit proudly introduced himself as a gay man and explained how he really only feels a sense of belonging within the Women and Gender Constituency at COP29. At the end of the session one of the co-coordinators of the constituency, Sobukwe led a series of chants that were said throughout the day "to make our voices heard and presence known."

The chants went like this: "When human rights are under attack what do we do? Stand up and fight back! When the gender agenda is undermined what do we do? Stand up and fight back!" "Climate? Justice! Gender? Justice!"

As we were chanting, a man stormed into the pavilion and yelled at us—demanding we "stop and be quieter," and that we were disturbing everyone around us. I wrote in my notebook: "A man stormed into the pavilion space, and with hostility, tried to quiet us." The coordinator, Sobukwe, in her radiant, powerful manner just responded by stating with volume: "No, it is Gender Justice Day, and we are here to take up space, make our voices heard."

Later that day, I attended a negotiation debrief and informational session with the WGC representatives from each of the negotiations. It took place again in the Civil Society Hub, and this Pavilion, unlike others, didn't have an elaborate sound system with speakers or microphones or headphones for listeners. Therefore, we all closely huddled around the WGC representatives and were straining to even hear them through the noise made by other pavilions. And it was even harder to decipher what the women were saying because two men decided to pull away two chairs from the circle into the corner of the pavilion and have a full-blown conversion between themselves as the policy brief was taking place. It was extremely distracting, and never once did they register that they were a disturbance within a space trying to host a side event discussion. I found myself looking their way, giving eye contact to see if that would make them realize they were being a disturbance and should maybe move to another place to have their loud debate. I thought about getting up to ask them to stop, but I waited to see if they would ever realize themselves, almost as an experiment. Sure enough, these men never realized their loud debate was infringing on a pavilion event. It was a blatant disrespect of the space, the WGC, and us women in the audience. I read it as yet another act of disregard for the presence of women, specifically the WGC, overall, at COP29 but especially on Gender Justice Day.

Throughout WGC talks and events as well as the other gender-focused events I attended, there was always at least a mentioning of how important it is for male involvement and integration within feminist climate justice. Across the board, the Women and Gender Constituency events were marked by an overall absence of male interest or participation. I noted in my journal that anecdotally, the most men I saw present at a WGC event or gender specific event I attended at COP29 was about 20%.

Negotiation Outcomes: Rollback on human rights, intersectionality, and gender

Throughout the conference, the Women and Gender Constituency advocated tirelessly for a gender-responsive transition and deepening the integration of gender equality and feminist principles in all climate actions, across all

negotiations (WGC 2024). The WGC came to COP29 with "high expectations" for gender equality advancement, the main priority being the delivery of an ambitious and transformative extension to the Lima Work Programme on gender (WGC 2024).

A few days into the negotiations, however, the Women and Gender Constituency quickly, and shockingly, had to shift their strategy and refocus energy from advancement to urging Parties to simply "Hold the Line" (WGC 2024). This became the central "motto" for the WGC, because many parties within negotiations wanted to remove not only the proposed improvements for gender specific climate action, but also already agreed upon, integrated human rights language from the Paris Agreement. As a bare minimum, the WGC had to advocate that existing language on human rights and gender equality be preserved. This backsliding on an already agreed text referring to intersectionality and gender is indicative of the deeply worrying regression regarding the rights of women and girls being rejected in the global arena today (Stallard 2024).

"We find ourselves having to argue for our most basic rights and to remind states of their commitment to gender equality under the SDGs amongst others, reflecting wider trends of shrinking civil society space and retrogressive attacks on gender," stated Paola Salwan Daher, a member of the WGC from Women Deliver (WGC 2024).

For example, a member of the Women and Gender Constituency that was in the technology centered negotiations, explained how the draft texts relating to technological advancement and exchange, which are usually marked by quick consensus and a decision among parties by the first week of COP29, was instead marked by conflict and stalemate moving into the second week of the COP. She explained how this was rather "unprecedented" and the disagreement all boiled down to the inclusion of gender provisions within the text.

The Women and Gender constituency came into COP29 with ten specific, robust demands (see figure). Unfortunately, after hours of closed-door meetings, the WCG explained at the countless policy briefs I went to that even getting parties to agree upon the expected commitment to uphold gender equality and progressively expand ambition, or at least hold a line with existing human rights agreements, was a struggle. Parties continually repeated their "red lines," which involved the bracketing or outright removal of any references to gender and intersectionality in many draft decisions (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security 2024; Stallard 2024).

Saudi Arabia, the Vatican, Egypt, and Russia were the main parties leading the backlash against women's rights and human rights at COP29, specifically obstructing the negotiations of the Lima Work Programme and Gender Action Plan draft texts and trying to prevent an agreement on all fronts. "They're doing everything to derail the process," one

anonymous negotiator stated to Politico (Weise and Schonhardt 2024).

The Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG) was established in 2014 to advance gender balance and integrate gender consideration into the work of Parties and the secretariat to achieve gender responsive climate policy and action (UNFCCC 2024). In short, the LWPG works to make sure that any work on climate change takes account of the experiences of women and channel an equitable share of money to them, setting out objectives and activities under five priority areas that aim to advance knowledge and understanding of gender—responsive climate actions for the mainstreaming implementation of it into UNFCCC and the work of the Parties (WGC 2024). The LWPG also outlines the necessity for women's full, equal and meaningful participation in the UNFCCC process. It then informs the Gender Action Plan, which provides a roadmap of activities where those commitments can be demonstrated or implemented (WGC 2024). The LWPG is updated every ten years, and therefore, it was due to be updated at COP29.

In the new updated LWPG, African and EU countries wanted to include provisions surrounding intersectionality, specifically within a line that acknowledges that not all women's experiences of climate change are the same - that they can differ depending on their "gender, sex, age and race." (Stallard 2024: Weise and Schonhardt 2024). Mwanahamisi Singano, the director of policy for the Women's Environment and Development Organization and co-lead of the WGC working group on the gender negotiations, said that a group of countries also opposed the text especially because of this, as "they are very concerned they are code words to allow sexual expression," and that the backlash also had elements of stark homophobia (Stallard 2024). Singano, who was in the negotiating room, said countries like Iran argued that intersectionality and textual inclusion of "gender" as well as "sex," therefore including transgender and gay women, was illegal under their laws and therefore they would not allow those groups to be recognized in the text (Stallard 2024).

"It is unacceptable," Colombia's environment minister and lead negotiator Susana Muhamad said of the stalling (Stallard 2024).

Despite facing immense setbacks and stalled negotiations in the "eleventh hour" in Baku, the Lima Work Programme on gender was advanced for a 10-year commitment for Parties. This ultimately will lead to the adoption of the Gender Action Plan at COP30, which works towards the integrated gender responsive policies and inclusive action (UNFCCC 2024; WGV 2024; Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security 2024). "Whilst we did not get the LWPG we want nor need, we welcome the decision nonetheless and are glad that we now have a 10-year LWPG," said (WECF 2024).

Parties therefore renewed their commitments to gender-responsive climate policy and action, but ultimately without the requisite funding and scope to fully address the specific circumstances and intersecting discrimination faced by many women (WGC 2024). "This milestone is a testament to our resolve, but we remain deeply concerned about the NCQG decision. Without sufficient public finance, gender-just climate action risks being an unfulfilled promise rather than a transformative reality," said Mwanahamisi Singano (WGC reflection). In climate finance currently, only about 0.01% of all worldwide funding is directed towards projects that address both climate change and women's rights (UNFCCC 2024). Moreover, funds that women-led, grassroots, youth, feminist and indigenous organizations do receive are often inflexible, riddled with unnecessarily complicated requirements, and often come as loans that perpetuate debt rather than grants (WECF 2024).

The outcomes of the climate finance negotiations, most centrally the New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance (NCQG), not only is significantly lower than the projected $4 trillion USD needed by developing countries, but it does not mention human rights or gender-responsive finance (WGC cop reflection). As Tara Daniel, the climate finance WGC coordinator explains, the NCQG is also designed to avoid providing new, additional, grant-based public finance necessary for gender-just and human-rights based climate action (WGC 2024).

The Just Transition negotiations, which promote approaches of transitioning to a green economy that account for the intersection of gender, climate, and security and are inclusive of women, youth and Indigenous groups, as well as other vulnerable populations, were also disheartening and marked by disagreement. There was no agreement on a Just Transition Work Programme, which also effectively leaves frontline communities impacted by climate change, women and girls especially, even more vulnerable (WGC 2024; WECF 2024).

The final statement made by the Women and Gender Constituency says it all: “While feminists' dedication and hard work managed to hold the line on work programmes on gender, we all left Baku feeling defeated, cheated and disappointed by the process and rollback.” (WGC 2024).

The backlash against fundamental rights serves as a stark litmus test for why this fight matters—it is both a sign of resistance to progress and proof that feminist climate justice is making an impact. The pushback of human rights within COP29 negotiations specifically signals something bigger: a broader struggle over power, representation, and the very foundations of equity in climate action.

“What do we do?” Stand up. Fight back.

I left Baku feeling “defeated, cheated, and disappointed,” as well. With the bitter taste of despondence within the wake of global leaders struggling to respond to the urgency of the climate crisis and the needs of frontline communities, within layers upon layers of deep-seated injustice. As I reflect on COP29 and the many voices, struggles, and moments of solidarity that shaped my time there, I am struck by the paradox of it all. The conference was both a space of frustration and a catalyst for resolve—a site of relentless backsliding on gender and human rights language, yet also a place where feminist leaders and allies stood their ground, refusing to let these injustices pass without a fight.

The “Hold The Line” COP tells a collective story: a story of backlash within the wake of justice, a story of deeply rooted patriarchal and petro-dominant influences. Yet, it also tells the story of the necessity of gender justice in climate action, of resilience in the face of systemic barriers, and of the power of community and solidarity to sustain hope even when the outcomes seem bleak. The failures of global leadership within COP29 and beyond, only reinforces the urgency of stronger, bolder, and more intersectional advocacy.

To be at COP as a young woman myself was to navigate a landscape that too often sought to silence, dismiss, or objectify. Yet, I found a deepened commitment to the work ahead, not in spite of it, but because of it. The Women and Gender Constituency’s chants still ring in my ears, not as an echo of defeat, but as a call to action. What do we do when our rights are under attack? Stand up, fight back!

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Looking in the wrong place? Ocean and Costal Climate Solutions at COP29

Isabella Childs Michael
Anthropology ‘25

A fish house in South Portland, Maine is swept away during a Jan. 13 storm. Photo by Susan Young, Bangor Daily News (Jules 2024)

In a letter to President Joe Biden early last year, Maine Governor Janet Mills requested a Major Disaster be declared for eight counties after two severe back-to-back storms hit Maine’s coast and caused severe damage on January 10th and 13th, 2024 (Mills 2024). Dozens of water rescues ensued; coastal businesses closed, and private and public infrastructure were damaged. In my community on Mount Desert Island, over 1,000 feet of trail was removed from Acadia National Park (Bryan 2024). As climate change causes more powerful storms and rising sea levels broaden the damage of these events (USGS 2024), storms of this magnitude are expected to become more frequent.

I traveled to Baku, Azerbaijan in November as part of Colorado College’s delegation to the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference, hereby referred to as COP29. This annual conference is considered

the most important climate change conference and serves as a gathering space for international powers to negotiate and agree on action on climate change. The vulnerability of my coastal community was at the forefront of my mind; I attended side events, special events, and press conferences that focused on ocean and coastal climate issues and solutions. Coming from a community where getting one's voice heard in local government is within reach, I strived to glean what I could from people more knowledgeable than I. I repeatedly heard the sentiment that attention on the ocean and coast is new at the COP, and it is only the third year since the Ocean Pavilion was established at the conference. While searching for concrete solutions to combat climate change and its impacts on coasts, I found fewer answers than I expected. I observed that panelists communicated notions that solutions weren't transferable or offered approaches, that is, mindsets, to addressing climate change locally, rather than offering viable and action-based solutions. Why aren't coastal and ocean solutions considered to be transferable across communities and nations? While specificity addresses the needs of individual communities, it seems counterintuitive for COPs—designed to foster collaboration and shared progress—to perpetuate isolated approaches to addressing climate change.

Scientist-led press conference

On November 18th, the 7th day of COP29, I attended a press conference called "UfM: (Union for the Mediterranean): MedECC presents latest findings on environmental and coastal risks and the Water-Energy-Ecosystems Nexus in the Mediterranean". The event's introduction began with an acknowledgment of the Valencia tragedy. I later learned it was in reference to the devastating torrential rain and flooding that swept over the coastal town of Valencia, Spain in late October, causing hundreds of casualties (Morris & Exposito 2024). Intense flooding in Valencia is another occurrence that could be expected more frequently due to climate change. Following the recognition of the extreme weather event, scientists Piero Lionello and Mohamed Abdel Monem from MedECC, the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change, presented findings from two studies. They explained that the Mediterranean is warming faster than the global average, and emphasized concerns like the overexploitation of fish stocks, plastic pollution, and coastal erosion in the Mediterranean. During the Q&A portion, I inquired about concrete solutions or policy recommendations that may apply to coastal communities broadly. Dr. Lionello explained that while he was not prepared to offer a list of actions, he urged that communities need locally specific policy and that it's more effective to address the problem at its source instead of after the fact. To say communities need locally specific policy acknowledges the nuances of individual communities. One might also conclude it is not the scientist's role to relay concrete solutions, but rather to pass on the data to individuals who will facilitate action. Even so, coastal communities are subject to many of the same destructive flooding, coastal erosion, and severe storms. Shouldn't there be some extent of transferability when it comes to concrete solutions? The concern that coastal climate solutions lack geographic transferability should not prevent individuals from sharing efforts that build resilience and combat climate change in coastal communities.

COP-goers wearing headphones attend the Ocean Pavilion event "Ocean Decade Vision 2030 White Paper for Challenge 5: Solutions to Climate Change– What does success look like?" Photo by Isabella Childs Michael.

Looking for answers at panel discussions

I sat in a malleable plastic chair, arranged neatly with others to maximize seating in the space-limited event nook. Black, standard-issue headphones let me hear the panelists amidst the rowdy pavilion zone. The event, titled "Ocean Decade Vision 2030 White Paper for Challenge 5: Solutions to Climate Change–What does success look like?" explored the benefits of large-scale actions like expanding vegetative coastal ecosystems and implementing offshore wind energy. Dr. Kilaparti Ramakrishna was a panelist and serves as a senior advisor on Ocean and Climate Policy to the President of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute. When prompted about local solutions, Dr. Ramakrishna spoke about education on climate change as a first step to get people on board. He says, "We need to be able to get the issue of climate change/climate warming to people at all levels, and once they know the connection, then they will be able to be more receptive to the kind of solutions that we're talking about." Dr. Ramakrishna adds that it's important to have a partnership between private companies and public entities to figure out collective coastal needs and to get work done when preparing for storms. Dr. Margaret Leinen from Scripps Institute of Oceanography asked me, "Do you have a town council?" I said that I did. "Do you go to the town council meetings?" "Yes," I responded. "Great. I think you're part of the solution for the town." Dr. Leinen's remarks indicate that an important step in making change at a local level involves building connections and starting a dialogue with community decision-makers. Panelist Robert Hoddenbach from Fugro, a surveying services company, shared his thoughts about making change on a local scale. Hoddenbach said, "To me, it's really connecting the emotion that people feel about their coast to the data" (Ocean Decade 2024). Hoddenbach urges finding ways to highlight climate change-caused shifts in the local environment that will matter to local community members, while backing it up with scientific reasoning. These approaches were more palpable than other events I attended. Still, events promoting concrete solutions were few and far between.

The Individual at COP29

Unexpected connections with observers at COP29 turned out to be fruitful, in some ways more so than attending the conference's events. At a youth networking event, I met Clea, a graduate student at the University of Maine studying Anthropology and Environmental Policy. How serendipitous to find a student studying the same discipline I do, in my home state, across the world in Baku! Clea did ethnography at a National Marine Sanctuary in Massachusetts as a master's student and more recently, worked at the National Science Foundation where she developed strategic ocean policies to support a healthy marine environment. Clea's PhD work focuses on the management of marine spaces, too. Clea was open to sharing details of her work experience and offered advice on career opportunities related to ocean and coastal-centered climate work.

Even if climate work cannot be one's primary occupation, another individual I met presented a way to make space for climate action. On a large empty COP29 bus leaving for the Baku airport, I met Serag—an Alexandria, Egypt native, recent graduate of college, and now resident of Hong Kong. Even after a long two weeks at COP29, Serag was kind enough to tell me about his work. Serag is a junior fellow at a residential college and holds an energy and environmental engineering degree but simultaneously, on his own time, tells stories of the ocean—most often of Egypt's Red Sea. Serag's work is published through his website and has been highlighted on other platforms like Oceanographic Magazine. Serag writes tangibly about his experience following conservation organizations, hatcheries, and other ocean subjects.

In a 2022 submission to the Save Our Seas Ocean Storytelling grant, Serag told the story of Ali, a boy from Quseir along the coast of Egypt's Red Sea, and his exchanges with dugong, a marine mammal closely related to manatees. The population of dugong in the port of Quseir is dangerously low. Serag wrote of the dugong's strong reliance on seagrass as sustenance, and Ali's discovery of a barren sea floor absent of seagrass. Serag's story amplifies the concerningly low number of dugongs in the Red Sea intensified by coastal development and overfishing. The narrative speaks to the beauty, and the tragedy, of the circumstance.

Serag presented a compelling method of amplifying ocean issues and initiatives on a personal yet relatable scale. Perhaps Serag's writing still didn't give me the tangible solutions I was looking for. Instead, they are compelling ocean "portraits," as Serag would call them, that hold the power to make people care about conserving the ocean and the life it holds. If self-published ocean storytelling can influence people to care, then couldn't it also compel people to act?

Technological versus nature-based solutions

While not in surplus, concrete solutions discussed across special events, side events, press conferences, and pavilion sessions at COP29 could most often be categorized into two types: technological and nature-based approaches. Technological solutions included offshore wind energy, ocean rise sensors, floating solar arrays, and engineering-based shoreline protection. Nature-based solutions focused primarily on expanding vegetation along coasts, like mangrove restoration. The article "Enhancing Climate Resiliency Through Improving Ecosystem Service in Shoreline Municipalities - Lessons from Canada" offers a concrete example of what coastal vegetation expansion can look like, discussing the implementation of 'living shorelines'. Living shorelines involve coastal structures made up of natural and organic materials. They are designed to be resilient against climate change-caused erosion, flooding, and extreme weather events while minimizing interference with the coast's natural processes. Even though the article explains how living shorelines are underrepresented in literature, living shorelines have been shown to have restoration value in Atlantic Canada (Ficzkowski & Krantzberg 2024, 5).

"Adaptive capacity of the Maine lobster fishery: insights from the Maine Fishermen's Climate Roundtables" discussed results from analyzing fifteen years of oral records of the Maine Fishermen's Climate Roundtables. Because for fishers and fishing-related businesses "mutual support systems exist without formal organization…a key component of adaptive capacity may be maintaining and strengthening social networks and knowledge sharing among lobster fishers and fishing communities" (Mason et al. 2024, 2). The article explained the power of knowledge exchange within local social networks to adapt livelihoods that are deeply tied to a changing climate. The sentiment of exchanging knowledge at an individual or local level resonated with my search for concrete solutions.

Conclusion

As an undergraduate not yet fully immersed in the professional world and its customs, my expectations for COP29 may have differed from those of more experienced attendees. I had anticipated a space underlining concrete solution—a forum where those on the frontlines of climate action would convene to exchange expertise and drive progress. Ultimately, in my time attending events at the venue, I noticed the tendency for panels to avoid discussing tangible, action-based solutions—instead sharing frameworks, mindsets, or ways to approach solutions. It is possible I missed discussions of the solutions I was looking for amidst the 'sea' of events occurring simultaneously at COP29. There could also be an assumption among event organizers and speakers that solutions are already understood by COP attendees. This raises broader questions about the role of COPs in bridging the divide between high-level frameworks and on-the-ground implementation of solutions.

In my search for tangible and action-based coastal climate solutions, knowledge sharing with other observers at COP29 and academic papers yielded the most practical insights. Findings from academic literature suggest that many concrete solutions already exist, but the information needs to be better circulated at climate action focused events like COP. Exchanges with people like Clea and Serag reinforced the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing at all levels, suggesting that an overlooked potential of COPs may lie in the informal networks formed outside of the negotiations and panels. Moving forward, integrating smaller, solution-oriented conversations and networking events into the formal structure of COP could help ensure that the global forum is not just a site of discussion but also a catalyst for tangible climate action

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Discovery to the Core of Climate Justice

Jessica Legaard

Introduction

In the depths of the second week of COP29, I successfully navigated the pavilion maze. It appeared straightforward, organized through rows with designated letters and columns of letters. Once inside, however, I often found myself getting lost. I had finally mastered the maze and found my desired pavilion in time for a panel. The Canada pavilion wasn’t hard to miss. Massive in size compared to some of the other pavilions I visited earlier that day. All pavilions were not created equally. Two women sat at the reception desk, and I inquired where the 11:00 a.m. panel about health and heat was located. They told me to head straight through the doors to the back room. I glanced behind them and saw the doors they were referring to. I had never been to a pavilion with a separate room for the side events. Normally there were chairs in rows gathered at the front of a room for panelists and hosts to present to the rest of the pavilion. In Canada, people sat at tables outside of this room working on laptops. I walked through them and opened the doors to the designated room. Large plush chairs were at the front of the room for the distinguished guests speaking at these discussions. I took a seat and pulled out my computer.

I decided to attend this pavilion for a talk entitled “Extreme Heat and Health: Best Practices, Challenges, and Opportunities for Collaboration, hosted by Health Canada.” Some of the best advice I received before attending COP29 was to explore topics I normally would not get the opportunity to learn about. My focus was on understanding what a ‘just transition’ means. Therefore, health was not related to this idea but associated with the need to protect workers' rights through trade and labor unions. I felt the desire to branch out into other topics and pressing issues that were ongoingly discussed at

the conference. This event was a way for me to branch out and pursue other topics that could lead me in potential directions. Furthermore, this discussion was led by Carolyn Tateishi, the Director of Health Canada, with leaders from various countries representing their health sectors. Such as Dr. John Balbus, U.S.; Bankole Michael Omoniyi, Lagos; Oliver Schnoll, WHO European Center for Environment and Health; and lastly Drew Stewart, Métis Nation of British Columbia, Canada.

All these officials made significant contributions to this talk. Out of everything I have learned from this panel, the words and sentiments Drew Stewart conveyed have remained with me. He began his speech by saying he would tell a story about hope. He set the scene in the year 2021, in which there was a heat dome in British Columbia, which caused over 600 people to die. Of those who passed away, 89% remained in their homes. This tragedy took place in a rich province, yet the government failed to help these people evacuate their homes. The majority of those left in their homes were of older populations and those with mental health needs. Stewart turned this tragedy on its head and questioned if it was a failure of the government. It was not just a government failure but that of society and the community. Even more than both, it was a failure of the heart.

Not too often throughout my time at COP had I heard tragedies framed as a direct failure of society and communities to care about one another. I was utterly shocked by this framing. Stewart looped back to his beginning statement that he was sharing a story of hope in moving forward from this tragedy. Indigenous knowledge from the Métis Nation has now been incorporated into governmental systems. For example, simply the addition of a damp washcloth on the foreheads of those affected can have a profound impact on surviving heat domes. Incorporating this simple yet highly effective practice represents a combination of Indigenous and Western practices. Sharing and deeply appreciating the health knowledge of another culture is a sign of hope, as it highlights a moment of coming together for a collective purpose.

Additionally, from the second that Stewart said he was sharing a story, I was roped in. I wanted to hear every word he had to tell us. This framing of storytelling has stayed with me since. I wonder what COP would have been like if people had shared more stories. Would there have been more human connection? What would change by eliciting feelings of care and empathy through listening to stories?

Climate Justice

The core of Stewart's story elicits the importance of combining climate action with climate justice. Climate justice is a broad term commonly used to describe a framework for discussing the embedded inequity of the climate crisis. Moreover, climate justice refers to the unequal effects of climate change. The term is widely used in conversations with the U.S. environmental justice movement, which was typically tracked to start in 1982. It dates to protests in Warren County, North Carolina, that combated the disposal of PCB-tainted soil at a landfill (Schlosberg 2014, 360). The highly toxic waste was to be dumped in a "poor, majority African American community" (Schlosberg 2014, 360). The resistance to these harmful and detrimental activities to human health and the environment was a "merger of the environmental and civil rights movements" (Lee 2019, 12). Hence, environmental justice and climate justice exist in related realms.

There is no one way to define either of these terms, as they are highly interconnected and reflect ecological and social justice aspects. A divergence of climate justice from environmental justice is its rooting in the "anticolonial struggles of Indigenous communities in the Global South" (Ogunbode et al 2024, 1144). The Global South faces greater exposure to the environmental risks of climate change. Meanwhile, historical, and continued exploitation continues to disproportionately weigh on these countries and communities. Histories of colonization through

racial, economic, and political oppression have challenged their adaptive capacities (Sultana 2022). Furthermore, climate justice means addressing these inequities that compound the challenges of the Global South to climate threats. Climate change is having the most severe impacts on those with the least responsibility for causing it. Those who have little contribution to carbon emissions are also the most at risk of its impacts, with limited capacities to respond (Newell et al 2021). This disadvantage often reproduces or worsens current inequities. Recognizing these inequities embedded within structural and responsive measures is necessary for aligning climate solutions with social justice. Patterns of marginalization cannot be corrected without identifying how they operate through distribution, procedural, and recognition processes (Ogungode 2022).

The current response to addressing these global inequities of climate change is through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, or Conference of Parties). However, the process is marked by persisting inequalities that "contribute to an uneven distribution of both climate change vulnerability and the ability to meaningfully influence climate futures" (Derickson et al. 2015, 305). Through this structure of exclusion, historical experiences of colonialism, development, and neoliberalism have bred an environment of distrust at COP (Routledge et al. 2017, 78). Therefore, these challenges need to be resolved to shape climate justice in the future (Routledge et al. 2017).

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)

Central to the UNFCCC process is the setting up of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Under the Paris Agreement, NDCs represent the pledges and plans countries set forth to reduce emissions. Countries are meant to contribute 'fair' and 'ambitious' targets, but these terms have not been defined. Fairness and equity are central to states' pledges, as countries tend to only "join agreements, remain a party to them, and increase their ambitions if they consider the contributions of their peers to be fair" (Winker et al 2017, 100). Accountability plays a significant role in the setting and tracking of NDCs. Since they are voluntary, the Global North and more developed countries struggle to keep each other accountable. A trickling effect cascades. Once a powerful and developed nation lacks ambitious goals, other countries do not want to reduce their emissions. Limiting emissions commonly means the reduction of a nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which slows economic growth. If another country continues to benefit from the exploitation of fossil fuels, why should the burden of climate action fall on others to reduce their emissions? As countries lack the implementation of necessary measures, the "magnitude of climate change impacts increases with temperature, and would therefore be more pronounced at temperature increases above 1.5 °C" (Winker et al 2017, 101).

The planetary threshold of 1.5 °C highlights that with the increase in temperature, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) will be those who are burdened the most. The countries that lack historical responsibility for carbon emissions will continue to be those most vulnerable to its effects. Furthermore, lacking the influence and capacity to create climate solutions demonstrates a significant disparity. This imbalance is a clear reflection of historical violence manifesting as *climate colonialism* (Sultana 2022). Post-colonial countries are marginalized through not only the continued ecological destruction but also the capitalistic exploitation and economic growth that reproduce colonial racial harms to entire Global South countries and marginalized communities in the Global North (Sultana 2022). Moreover, in efforts to address climate effects, the UN system recycles colonial harms by the "imposition of rules from powerful countries" to limit the influence of marginalized countries in negotiations (Sultana 2022, 1). Hence, these countries continue to shape the narrative of climate change and avert the blame. This is a major matter of climate justice. Powerful and rich

nations hold the ability to respond to climate change but are not held accountable for their continued exploitation of the environment. Social justice is a significant matter that needs to be incorporated into systemic processes. Without recognizing the neocolonial structures that persist, transformation for climate justice persists and remains unresolved (Sultana 2022).

In Baku, Azerbaijan, I began to see the important link between NDCs and climate justice, as they are imperative for mitigating the oncoming effects of climate change. I attended an event entitled "Youth-Led Climate Forum Dialogue on Nationally Determined Contributions." I was particularly intrigued by the youth-led aspect. The youth leaders of this discussion represented Azerbaijan and Pakistan with a wide diversity of panelists from Singapore, Gambia, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The prominent panelists commonly agreed that youths need to be a part of the decision-making process. Ministries across these countries recognize the multi-generational aspect of climate change and youth involvement as pivotal. Since youth are one of the largest stakeholders in this process, meaningful contributions that expand the youth platform are critical. Including youth in these important conversations about enhancing the country's ambitions is not simply for the sake of diversity but highlights a fundamental right for youth to reach the national level of governance.

This dialogue proved useful in understanding the procedural justice of youth inclusion. However, it fell short in the discussion of how youth involvement was currently making a difference for NDCs. I was left with lingering questions. How are these governments making it more accessible for youth to participate? How are older generations understanding this change in thinking to include younger voices? How are youth being encouraged to participate in local settings? How are NDCs going to include education and skill development for youth? Most of all, was the youth-led aspect of this discussion beneficial? How was this specific dialogue shaped by including the youth voices? I went into the discussion wondering about the justice aspect of NDCs. Most of all, now I am still thinking about climate justice and how Global South countries will continue to remain vulnerable given the lack of ambitious NDCs to limit fossil fuel emissions. While my questions remain unanswered, this discussion educated me on aspects of youth and NDCs I did not have prior knowledge of. The silence and avoidance of climate coloniality became the largest takeaway. No one was going to talk about the lack of action and accountability for developed nations. The Global North was going to continue profiting from the extraction of fossil fuels and the degradation of the environment. Global legacies would continue to shape environmental inequalities.

Youth-Led Dialogue on Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) (From left to right Muhammad Haseeb; Pakistani, Saida Mammadova; Azerbaijan, Verania Chao; UNDP, Malang Sambou Manneh; Gambia, and Ari Adipratomo; Singapore)

Just Transition

To make a global transition that decentralizes fossil fuels as essential for economic growth, a 'just transition' is imperative for achieving equity and fairness while limiting atmospheric harm. To limit the threat of anthropogenic climate change, an entire shift away from fossil fuels to a new energy system involves the process of transitioning to new methods (Wang and Lo 2021, 1). The only way

to stop the warming of the planet is to limit the carbon footprint. There is a movement toward a low-carbon model, which would reflect a model for NDCs coupled with economic growth. An early application of a 'just transition' dates to a U.S. trade union movement in response to new regulations. The result led to the closure of industries that put air and water safety at risk. (Newell et al 2012, 1) Throughout this, it is necessary to keep justice concerns in mind. Concerns for this model relate to not only the loss of jobs in the fossil fuel industry but also the creation of new injustices and inequalities without addressing the pre-existing structural inequities (Wang and Lo 2017, 2). Hence, a just transition has the potential to model a socially responsible way of creating climate justice.

Before attending the annual summit, "AN380: Ethnographers at COP29" I completed an event ethnography assignment. The article I chose is by Emma Banks, Bucknell University. Entitled "Observing the Just Transition: From Colombia to COP28," Banks brings in Colombian perspectives and experiences at COP28. Banks portrayed the unmatched efforts of the community and government. Currently, in La Guajira, Colombia, local activism plays an influential role in the movement toward decarbonization. Despite Colombia being a major fossil fuel producer, they are committed to the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty. They are heavily advocating for the phasing out of fossil fuels (Banks 2024). Non-extractive approaches are needed to repair the social and economic sacrifices La Guajira and other fossil fuel-focused communities have made. "The region [La Guajira, Columbia] has been devastated by the impacts of coal mining, including but not limited to thousands of displaced Afro-descendant and Indigenous people, contaminated and scarce fresh water, and health problems among the local population" (Banks 2024, 1). A whole economic transition is needed to address the health disparities, labor rights, and community needs. Banks further developed that if the top-down approach from the government does not reflect the needs of its people, then an equitable transition cannot occur.

During the first week of the "Finance COP," I attended an event entitled "Climate Finance Needs of Developing Countries." I made my way from the pavilion area into the Side Event segment of the venue. Sitting in Side Event room eight, I watched ministers of finance, environment, and sustainable development fill the room. They shook hands and reviewed their notes for the event that began promptly. Sophie De Coninck, Means of Implementation Director of UNFCCC, began the event by making remarks about the need for financial inclusion for the most vulnerable populations. She exclaimed that now is a more pressing time than ever to leverage the dollar, nationally and internationally because it is vital to build an inclusive economy. Finally, the panel began which included delegates from South Sudan, Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Tonga, Columbia, Maldives, Saint Kitts, and Nevis. Each representative had an allotment of three minutes to share their country's current position and the significance of finance at this moment.

High-Level Panel Discussing Finances During the Heightening of the Climate and Debt Crisis. (From Left to Right: Tiofilusi Tueti; Tonga, Ali Shareef; Maldives, Josephine Napwon Cosmas; South Sudan, Joyelle Clarke; Saint Kitts and Nevis, Hassan Bakhit Djamous; Chad, Jacques Assahoré Konan; Côte d'Ivoire, Beatrice Atim Odwong; Uganda, Susana Muhamad; Colombia.)

Susana Muhamad, the Colombian Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development and President of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP16) began her speech. Muhamad set the scene and provided context for the audience about Colombia. As a middle-income country, the current "fiscal situation does not represent [that of] a middle-income country." Colombia's economy relies heavily on the extraction and exportation of fossil fuels. Hence, how will they replace the exports of fossil fuels and ensure a whole economic transition? When Muhamed references a "whole economic transition," she is validating the need to repair communities that have vested themselves in fossil-fuel exploitation. A just transition is needed to ensure these fossil-fuel-based communities that rely on this income are not left further behind. The people of these communities face health effects from exposure to hazardous and toxic materials. Laborers will lose their jobs. Basic human rights need to be ensured in the next phase as we move into a "green" economy. Alternative economic sectors need to come to fruition now as we enter a critical stage of the climate crisis. Additionally, Colombia faces "emergency after emergency." Muhamad stated that 85% of territories have flooded, Amazon fires rage on, and the need to protect biodiversity and stop deforestation becomes even more pertinent. She quickly commanded the room with the gravity of her statements. Everyone heard the strong emotions that radiated through Muhamad's persuasive stance.

Conclusion

At COP29, amidst the immense amount of jargon, financial commitments, and political relations, the stories were what stood on their own. They lingered and developed sentiments of vulnerability, fear, failure, and hope that humanized an overwhelming global crisis. Without these moments, my COP29 experience would have altered greatly. Drew Stewart's framing of the 2021 British Columbia heat dome as a "failure of the heart" got at the root of the climate crisis. There are systemic and institutional obstacles and a greater collective societal failure to care for one another. This raised an essential question: How might the global response to the climate crisis change if we prioritized stories over impersonal commitments that lack human centralization?

The persistent participation of the Global South and communities that face climate injustices reveals a hopeful truth. Within the struggles and challenges, there lies the opportunity for reimagining change within systems of power for accountability, care, and empathy. Stewart's storytelling usage was not an isolated moment. It reflected a larger theme throughout COP29. Stories have the power to transcend the usage of intangible data and numbers. They have the power to connect collective communities across the globe. As I continue to reflect on the discussions of Nationally Determined Contributions, just transitions and climate finance, it becomes increasingly clear that climate justice cannot be achieved without a fundamental shift in perspective. Transitioning to low-carbon models is not only about shifting our energy systems but also about using this as a transformative moment to address historical and structural inequities. A pathway for listening and understanding more voices is necessary for this project of imagining, as a pathway to help communities thrive. Justice is the foundation upon which any meaningful climate action must be built. COP29 reaffirmed that at the root of the climate crisis is fundamentally human. Hence, our response needs to center on the stories of grief, resilience, and hope. A more ideal future will not be possible before listening to all voices and for all scales of action to take place and to care for one another.

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Armed Conflict at COP29: How Narratives of Conflict Manifested at COP29

Jamie Harvie
Anthropology 25'

Introduction

Each year, the UNFCCC's Conference of Parties (COP) accrues an international assemblage of world leaders and students, activists and NGOs, government officials and economists, and everyone in between. During this two-week event, these individuals and delegations – all with varying levels of power, capital, and social capital – become audiences and participants. They sit and speak in press conferences and negotiations, walk the mazes of pavilions and exhibits, and listen to the proclamations of presidents and prime ministers in the plenaries. Ostensibly, they're to witness and participate in the international efforts fighting against climate change. However, that is only one aspect of how the space of COP is utilized.

The international power and clout concentrated here afford a valuable opportunity for the efforts of state and non-state actors to produce narratives around contested (inter-)national affairs. This is especially true for the host nation – as the city where COP-goers eat, sleep, and explore becomes an inescapable venue for nation-branding. At COP28 in Dubai, for example, participants were subject to an omnipresent performance of "green nationalism" (Koch 2024, 2). There, the language, physical structure, and agenda of events and spaces were tailor-fitted to a narrative of oil's benevolent and prosperous heritage in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the possibilities of a sustainable, post-oil future. In so doing, they obscured the climatic harm of Emirati resource extraction and attempted to legitimize their authoritarian form of governance.

Azerbaijan, the UAE's petro-state analogue in the Caucasus region, hosted 2024's COP29 in its capital city of Baku. This year, one of the most common genres of narrative revolves around global conflict. Particularly visible in this regard were Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in Azerbaijan, and Israel's war in Gaza. At COP29, the space became a symbolic flashpoint for these conflicts, revealing the strategies that state and non-state actors have employed to produce narratives around them.

Curating the Space

One of the primary vehicles by which national delegations furthered their narratives around armed conflict was through the curation of their pavilions at Baku Stadium. It is an act that involves deciding what information to include and exclude, how to communicate it (i.e. what values or logics to appeal to), and through what medium. At COP29, state delegations, (I)NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations hosted the pavilions, often incorporating art, food, video screens, poster boards, and info-blurbs into the space.

Previous COP-goers have noted that these exhibitions are crafted around a particular statement related to climate action – e.g. what aspects of it should be prioritized, its relationship to other issues, what the pavilion sponsors have accomplished, etc. (Burchert 2024, 5). In other words, the pavilions "serve as giant soapboxes from which nations get to tell their climate stories to other delegates, the media and observers" (Phadke 2015, 90). Within this context, mentions of war, which are often disconnected from the climate crisis in public perceptions, may seem out of place or even counterproductive. Yet COP29 exposes the reality that, for many nations, their climate stories are inseparable from narratives of armed conflict. Owing to this, there were pavilions explicitly curated around armed conflict and others implicitly alluding to it. The former of these was best represented by the Ukrainian

pavilion, whereas the Israeli pavilion exemplified the latter. In both, however, the narratives presented were tied to climate action.

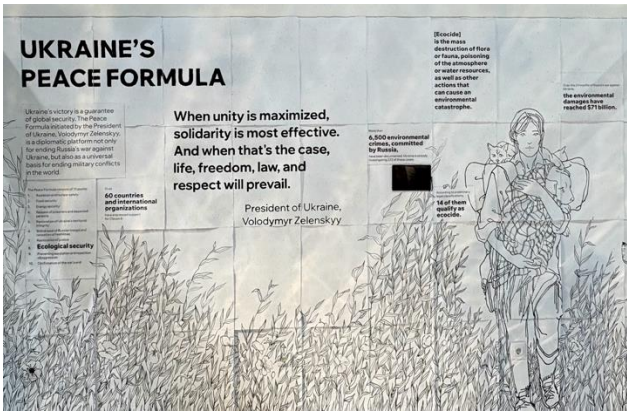

Image of the Ukrainian pavilion

The Ukrainian Pavilion

The first thing I noticed about the Ukrainian pavilion was its walls – decorated in hundreds of sheets of paper, illustrated with scenes of nature, destruction, and reconstruction. Upon closer inspection, the paper's texture became noticeable: each sheet was populated with dozens of irregularly shaped bumps. As it would turn out, these bumps are seeds. The wall of text at the front of the pavilion noted the reason for this: "After the conference, the walls will literally sprout – their fragments are to be planted with our partners around the world as symbols of the unity that shapes humanity's green future."

Image of Ukrainian pavilion

Here, the thesis of this space starts to take form. The pavilion was curated around a narrative of Ukrainian resiliency and commitment to climate action in the face of Russia's invasion and ecocide, "which is jeopardizing the ecosystems, energy, and food security of the whole world," as one wall read. The illustrations and text on the walls – with their particular emphasis on Ukraine's green recovery efforts, energy transition, and sustainable agriculture – all served to reinforce this message.

To underscore the theme of global unity, the Ukrainian delegates provided attendants with their own sheet of seeded paper, inviting them to write anything of their choosing on it. When presented with this opportunity, I personally chose to write a message of encouragement to the delegates and noted the optimism that their efforts inspired within me. With how despair-inducing the conference could often be, I found some happiness in the thought that I could be contributing to Ukraine's recovery from Russian ecocide (albeit in a tiny way) when my sheet is planted.

However, the seeds were not the only way the Ukrainian delegation actively engaged its attendants in the narrative of Ukrainian destruction/reconstruction. Following a growing trend in the field of humanitarian communication and action, the pavilion utilized virtual reality (VR) technologies in order to immerse COP-goers in six animated scenes of ecocide and climate destruction being caused by Russia's invasion. VR, deservedly or not, has gained a reputation among activists for its potential as an "empathy machine" that has the power to inspire social engagement on key issues (Sora Domenjó 2022, 2). Putting on the headset is meant to isolate viewers from the sensory input of the outside world, engulfing them in the scenes' sights and sounds, "giving the illusion that distance is symbolically and technically annihilated" (Gorin 2022, 152). This intent is demonstrated in an interview with

Artem Ivanenko, the creator of the pavilion's EcoLens experience:

"[T]he topic of war has become peripheral for many people around the world – they've 'grown tired' of it…That's why we chose to target the audience's basic senses…we channel information straight to the viewer's heart, placing them at the center of the events as the main protagonist. This approach etches the emotion – and, along with it, the message we want to convey – deep into their memory."

I cannot speak for other attendants, but I do believe that my experience with the EcoLens saw the realization of this intent. The most impactful scene for me began within the setting of an empty black space – illuminated by the glow of thousands of incandescent lightbulbs, populated with the disembodied voices of happy children and friendly conversations. In that moment, enveloped in the warm visuals and sounds of the scene, I remember experiencing a sense of comfort. This feeling was short-lived, however, as the loud reverberations of bombs began shaking the lightbulbs, causing them to lose power.

Then, it was just pitch-blackness – a true vacuum. In the seconds to follow, a small pinprick of red light appeared in front of me while loud humming filled my ears. In that moment, experiencing confusion and uncertainty, I felt my heart rate rise. Soon, more humming began, and a growing number of red lights started to brighten the space around me – the source was becoming clear. In front of me were thousands of gas-powered generators, each one producing plumes of smog; and this time, there were no voices to be heard.

The next moment, I was transported outside Earth's atmosphere, looking down at Europe from the window of a spacecraft. From this vantage, I witnessed country-spanning clouds of smoke rise from Eastern Ukraine and pour out over its neighbors – a visual metaphor for the invisible CO_2 emissions. In the blink of an eye, I was brought back to Earth, standing in front of the Eifel Tower. But instead of the picturesque Parisian landscape seen in photographs, the deluge of ash raining down on the city coated everything in a bleak shade of gray.

Image of an attendant wearing the EcoLens headset at the Ukrainian pavilion. (Source: Ukrainian pavilion's YouTube video: "EcoLens impresses guests of the Ukrainian pavilion at COP29")

This particular scene is meant to expose the viewer to some of the indirect, often-overlooked sources of greenhouse gas emissions that arise from armed conflict. Furthermore, it also highlights the transboundary effects of Russia's invasion – as this conflict's emissions will not be limited to the borders of either country. Instead, the more than 175 million tons of CO_2 that have been produced since February of 2022 will have world-spanning effects (De Klerk 2024). Thus, the decorated walls and interactive elements of this pavilion further the message that not only is there global unity in Ukraine's reconstruction, but also in its destruction. The explicit production of this narrative is the core function of the Ukrainian pavilion. As Oleksiy Ryabchyn – the Advisor to the Ukrainian Minister of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources – noted in an interview with me, this pavilion is "our way to tell our story."

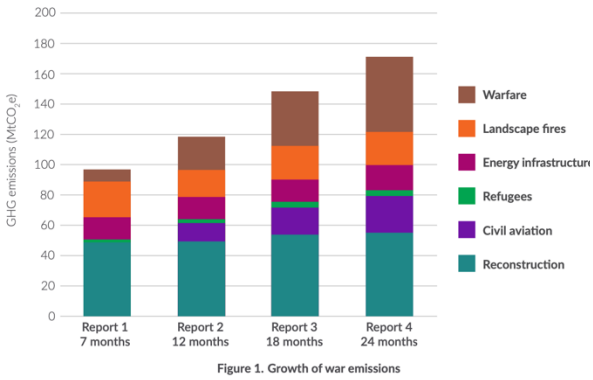

Figure 1. Growth of war emissions

175 million tCO_2e is more than the annual GHG emissions from a highly industrialized country like **The Netherlands**, putting **90 million new petrol cars** on the road, or building **260 coal-fired power units** of 200 MW each.

Graph of total CO_2 emissions resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine at different points during the conflict. (Source: the Initiative on GHG Accounting of War's fourth report on "Climate Damage Caused by Russia's War in Ukraine")

The Israeli Pavilion

Conversely, the Israeli pavilion makes no explicit mention of their ongoing war in Gaza apart from a sign in the back with a yellow ribbon and the words "Bring Them Home Now! October 7th." Nevertheless, the central art-piece of the exhibit is a direct allusion to Zionist narratives of settler-colonialism. It is a large circular sign showcasing a tree divided into two vertical halves. One half of it is dead and surrounded by dry, cracked dirt, while the other half is teeming with lush foliage, surrounded by green grass and flowing streams. Emblazoned upon it are the words: "From Desert to Oasis."

Image of central art piece in the Israeli pavilion.

To the untrained eye, this may appear to simply be a reference to Israeli afforestation policies and similar land management strategies. However, when I specifically questioned an Israeli delegate about the sign's relevance to any such policies, he plainly responded that, "It's not about any specific programs, it is really just ideological." Although I was a bit surprised by the frankness of his response, I did ask this question knowing I would get an answer along those lines; for I understood beforehand that the theme of "From Desert to Oasis" is a clear reference to the central Zionist narrative of "Making the Desert Bloom" (Lederman 2016, 397). So, what does it mean to 'make the desert bloom'? And why is it so centrally visible in the space of COP29's Israeli pavilion?

Put succinctly, "making the desert bloom" is a specific manifestation of the broader colonialist concept, *terra nullius*, that is particular to the ideology and geography of Zionism (Svirsky 2012). To further elaborate, this narrative starts from three assertions: 1) prior to establishing the Israeli state in 1948, there had been no formal occupation of the territory; 2) those that did live in the region – referred to as "brigands" by Theodor Herzl in his 1902 novel, *The Old New Land* – had failed to make productive use of the land; and 3) what forms of land-use they had been practicing were actively degrading the territory into a "desert wasteland."

The assertions put forward in this "cultivation-based argument" serve as justifications for Palestinian removal and subsequent acts of Israeli settlement and cultivation, framing them as forms of ecologically benevolent action (Lederman 2016, 396). In other words, "It validate[s] the dispossessions and repossessions intrinsic to settler colonialism…while adding a veneer of altruism" (Harris 2004, 174). While countless narratives have been employed to justify the establishment of the Israeli state – e.g. religious

ideas of the holy land, the need for a state that will not enact antisemitic violence, etc. – it is notable that the one produced in their COP29 pavilion space is associated with ideas of sustainable land management. I believe this was a deliberate choice, as it is likely that style of messaging that attendants at COP29 would be most attuned to. Presumably, its intention is to legitimize their control over the region within the context of climate action by suggesting that, in comparison to Palestinians, the Israeli state is capable of good land stewardship.

Israel's COP27 pavilion, with a similar art piece about the transition from desert to a well-managed green landscape. (Source: Jerusalem Post's article, "Egypt's Sharm e-Sheikh decks out for COP27 climate change conference")

Good, effective messaging will always consider its audience. At both the Israeli and Ukrainian pavilions, one can see how these nations have implicitly or explicitly produced narratives of armed conflict through the curation of those spaces. Furthermore, owing to their audiences at COP29 – i.e. government officials, media personnel, and members of civil society engaged in the fight against climate change – it should not come as a surprise that the narratives in both pavilions were tied to climate action. What sets them apart, however, is how they get connected. I would argue that Ukraine uses its story of armed conflict to demonstrate the need for stronger climate action, whether it is through the international community recognizing ecocide as a war crime, investments in green recovery, or using renewable technologies to decentralize their energy infrastructure. On the other hand, it appears that Israel is appealing to the values and goals of international climate action in order to legitimize its actions and justify its narrative of armed conflict and colonization.

From Spaces to Speeches

For the production of narratives, the audible and rhetorical can be just as, if not more, important as the visible. Speeches and presentations, especially those that occur at high-profile events like COP29, are critical mechanisms by which narratives can be widely heard and disseminated. The Ukrainian and Azerbaijani delegations provide a particularly salient case study for how this strategy has manifested at COP29. Importantly, however, "Analyses of narrative must sometimes go beyond studying discrete events…to study chains of narrating events, because important functions of narrative discourse sometimes take shape only across such chains" (Wortham and Rhodes 2015, 174).

Fortunately, there already exists a years-long chain of 'narrating events' before COP29 for both of these countries; and these chains similarly focus on the subjects of environmental justice and ecocide as they relate to their respective conflicts (Palmqvist 2023). Thus, the content of both countries' speeches at COP29 will be analyzed within the context of their respective chains, as I aim to demonstrate how states utilize their stages at this conference to produce and reinforce critical (inter-)national narratives around armed conflict.

Ukraine

Similar to their pavilion space, the Ukrainian speeches and press conferences at COP29 aim to produce a narrative of global unity in the destruction/reconstruction of Ukraine. This interpretation is consistent with Josefin Palmqvist's (2023) analysis of various Ukrainian speeches and press releases since the beginning of the war. In her assessment, this chain of narratives "antagonizes Russia as a

global threat" and characterizes their actions of ecocide as "moral proof that Russia's government does not care for the international system and laws" (Palmqvist 2023, 64). Likewise, the COP29 pavilion event, "Ecocide as a Weapon of War," delineated the ways Russia has committed ecocide, damaged the environment, and poisoned Ukraine's soil with its munitions. This latter point also ties to Ukraine's long-standing position that this conflict is transboundary in nature, previously arguing that Russia's impacts on their agricultural sector – worsened by "soil pollution" – has exacerbated global food insecurity (Palmqvist 2023, 64).

Apart from content, the tone of these events has also carried over across the narrative chain and into COP29. As Palmqvist noted, "when Ukraine communicates with other states, the tone is positive and motivating," with an emphasis on collaboration (35). Accordingly, during the "High-level event on President Zelenskyy's Peace Formula," the Ukrainian pavilion invited various ministers and officials from European countries for an optimistic dialogue on international cooperation in their recovery and accession to the European Union (EU).

Nevertheless, discussion of Ukraine's green recovery seems to have previously been left out of this chain. Considering it was central focus of both their pavilion space and speech events; however, it seems that this topic has recently gained importance for their climate-conflict narrative. In my conversation with Oleksiy Ryabchyn, he indicated that the emphasis on this particular theme is related to their intensifying efforts to achieve EU accession, which requires the development of green infrastructure plans. Here, one can see how "Ukraine uses different cultural frames/norms depending on who the audience is" (Palmqvist 2023, 34).

Azerbaijan

As the hosts of COP29, Azerbaijan had promised that they would work to make this a "COP of peace" – not just referring to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, but also to their own conflict with Armenia in the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Although this conflict spans over a century now, its two most recent iterations in 2020 and 2023 led to Azerbaijan's total military conquest of the region and the dissolution of the predominantly Armenian Republic of Artsakh. Since the 2020 offensive where Azerbaijan gained control over 73% of the region, they have consistently used their venues at UN events to "always remind any audience that Azerbaijan freed territories and that they are recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan" (Palmqvist 2023, 43). At COP29, it was no different.

Map of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the disputed territories. In Armenian, they are called the 'Republic of Artsakh,' as opposed to 'Karabakh' in Azerbaijani. 'Nagorno-Karabakh' simply means Highlands Karabakh. (Source: Climate Home News)

Within the first 90 seconds of his opening speech at the World Leaders Summit, President Ilham Aliyev remarked on the "30-year-long occupation by Armenia" in Karabakh – accusing the nation of engaging in the ethnic cleansing and deportation of over one million Azerbaijani people. Following these comments, Aliyev spoke about Azerbaijan's contributions to various international organizations for a few minutes. Eventually, however, he returned to Karabakh. Although this time, he championed

the burgeoning renewable energy projects in the districts "liberated from Armenian occupation four years ago." With this particular talking point, Aliyev is reiterating a critical narrative about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – i.e. that they are "rebuilding the liberated territories into green cities" (Palmqvist 2023, 64). However, other scholars, activists, and international officials have called these projects, and the rhetoric around them, acts of "greenwashing" that serve as a cover for ethnic cleansing.

But even when Karabakh is not mentioned by name, its centrality to the Azerbaijani agenda at COP29 remains evident. Sitting at the 'Leaders' Summit of the Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) on Climate Change,' I awaited declarations from the leaders of these SIDS on the necessity to act quickly and forcefully on global emissions. To my surprise, however, the first person to take the stage for speeches was President Aliyev. The first half of his speech spoke to Azerbaijan's financial and humanitarian support for SIDS and the need for powerful climate action on their behalf. Yet halfway through he switched subjects, shifting focus to the "neo-colonialism" of France and Netherland's overseas 'territories' (read: colonies). Among other actions, he decried the carelessness and harm caused by their nuclear testing in French Polynesia and condemned the brutal repression of recent decolonial protests in New Caledonia.

In a vacuum, everything President Aliyev said about the continuation of French and Dutch colonialism is true and he would be right to bring it up. In fact, each condemnation was met with applause from Global South leaders and delegations, and I too found myself applauding at certain points. Nevertheless, something felt off about his decision to speak on these issues, leading to many traded glances of perplexion with my classmate. However, his final remarks in the speech alluded to his true intentions here:

But what else can we expect from the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe if Chief European diplomat Josep Borrell calls Europe a garden and the rest of the world jungles?! If we are jungles, *then stay away from us and don't interfere in our affairs*. (Emphasis added).

As it turns out, France is one of the most vocal opponents of Azerbaijan's actions in Karabakh, issuing multiple condemnations and calls for sanctions. So – rather than statements born solely out of righteous indignation on behalf of those subject to colonial rule – Aliyev's proclamations feel more like political posturing with the goal of delegitimizing France's denouncement of Azerbaijan.

If we are to follow the imperative of Stanton Wortham and Catherine Rhodes (2015) and place these admonishments of France into a narrative chain, it is necessary to return to President Aliyev's speech at the opening ceremony. Towards the end of his remarks, Aliyev decried the "double standards, the habit of lecturing other countries, and political hypocrisy [that] have become a kind of modus operandi for some politicians, state-controlled NGOs, and fake news media in some Western countries." When connecting these comments to those made about France, a critical part of Azerbaijan's Karabakh narrative starts to become visible. That is, for him and others, the West has lost its status as a moral beacon for the world – or perhaps never even had it.

Thus, there are both persuasive and hostile aspects to their messages. President Aliyev's speeches attempt to preempt criticism from Western nations, inviting listeners to view such critiques as illegitimate acts of hypocrisy. Simultaneously, however, they continually appeal to ideas of Karabakh's green development in an effort to attract foreign investment – particularly from those very same countries they just lambasted as hypocrites. Whether one buys this narrative or not, it is indisputable that Azerbaijan sought to utilize

their opportunity as hosts of COP29 to reinforce it at every possible turn.

President Aliyev speaking at the 'Leaders Summit of the SIDS on Climate Change.'

Conclusion

When asked about how he believes armed conflict manifests at COP29, the Israeli delegate I spoke with responded: "Look, everyone has a narrative. They have a narrative, and we have one too. We're all trying to push something here." At COP29, these narratives are commonly produced through state-sanctioned discourse and the curation of space in Baku Stadium. They contain and manufacture linkages to chains of related and seemingly unrelated messages that exist across "different spatiotemporal locations" (Wortham and Rhodes 2015, 161). Sometimes they are explicit, like Ukraine's pavilion space and speech events. Other times, they are more indirect, as is the case with the Israeli pavilion and many of Aliyev's comments. Nonetheless, owing to COP's status as a 'climate change conference,' it has become commonplace for each of these states (and others) to connect these narratives to their 'climate stories' – and attempt to legitimize them and their prescriptions for action in the eyes of this particular audience.

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The Laws of COP

Following sub-national governance at COP29

Megan O'Brien

Leading up to and into the UN COP29 Climate Change Conference our class began reading Naveeda Kahn's book "In Quest of a Shared Planet: Negotiating Climate from the Global South*"* (2023). This book wonderfully explains the experience of being at COP and became a guide in many ways for other students and me. Sarah and Myra, our professors, were able to connect us with Naveeda and in the second week of the conference we were able to share a meal with her. I shared with her my interest in law at COP29 and she put me in contact with Bareesh Hasan Chowdhury, a member of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) and a badged Bangladesh party member at this year's COP. Similar to Naveeda Kahn's story, and method, of trying to find Asad Rehman at COP21 in Paris, tracking Bareesh down proved to be quite a challenge.

We spent the next day communicating over email to try and find a time to talk and then eventually graduated to WhatsApp, the main communication method at COP. We agreed upon a day, November 18th, and a time, 4:00 pm. Things didn't go quite according to plan—a common trend of COP. We both had a meeting run long, and so we pushed the time back. Bareesh then had an emergency and requested a change in meeting place. I waited for a while outside the side event rooms before I had to go to my next meeting starting at 6:00 pm. We agreed to try again tomorrow. The same thing happened the next day. Day three rolled around and I woke up feeling rundown, a little under the weather, and a little blown off by the previous days. But I was determined to get my interview. I went into the venue later than normal, planning to stay only for the side event featuring fellow students Havalin Haskell and Jamie Harvey, and my meeting with Bareesh. The side event ended, and he said he would be outside of the side event rooms, of which there were nine. He must have snuck by me because next thing I knew I received another WhatsApp message asking to meet in Area C, on the other side of the venue. At this point, I was feeling delirious and the rest of the group stated I looked "rather unwell." Nevertheless, I needed this interview. I sat on the ground outside of a coffee shop and waited. Eventually a man with long hair surrounded by a large group entered Area C and I knew my luck had changed. I ran over to intercept him and introduce myself.

We then each got a drink, juice for me and espresso for him, and stood smack in the bustle of Area C while I peppered him with questions, eager to get the most I could out of what I knew would be only a few moments in a clearly very busy person's schedule. I asked about his experience at COP, what it was like being a lawyer, if he had any recommendations on what I should be doing to make the most out of my experience, and so much more. Despite feeling at my worst mentally and physically, the conversation with Bareesh was so insightful and invigorating it pierced through the fogginess of my sickness, I can remember each detail as clearly as if he were standing right in front of me.

One answer stands out in particular. He told me that even though he is losing faith in the COP process, that so many people "don't get to see where law is made" and that "this right here is where the law is made." In that moment, in that one insight, my perspective of COP, which had begun to be weighed down with overwhelming frustration, and of course sickness, shifted. He told me to follow the negotiations and really hone in on the minutia. "To spend all of COP in the side event rooms would be a waste." Despite dwindling faith in the process, Bareesh still held faith in the law—a true lawyer. I spent my last days at COP following his advice. Chasing Bareesh around the venue was well worth it—our interaction turned out to be one of the highlights of my COP experience.

I went into the conference looking to follow the broad topic of law at COP—hoping to find more direction once arriving at the conference. I had questions about how law was utilized. Was the conference full of lawyers? How often would law be mentioned? What was the place of a lawyer at COP, in the side event rooms or in the negotiations? This interest is personally driven, as I hope to pursue law school in my future. After a week of very few mentions of law, I decided to switch my focus to the presence of sub-national governance. I found hope in the topic after I attended my first talk on sub-national governance where the speakers we able to shine some hope on the results of the election. We arrived at COP29 within the wake of the 2024 US election outcome, where the realities of another Trump administration most likely will mean the United States will pull out of the Paris agreement again, shifting the US delegation's position at COP29 towards what they can do with the time they have left. I came to this topic looking for the answers to big questions surrounding the upcoming change in administration but quickly learned that subnational presence at COP precedes Donald Trump's election.

There are nine civil society constituencies of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 2024), one of which is Local Government and Municipal Authorities (LGMA). This constituency was created in 1995 to represent local and regional governments. Though COPs are all about individual national efforts in some ways, there is a strong understanding of how much work really gets done and implemented at the more local level. Subnational governance means governance at the level of states, cities, municipalities, and other types of localized governments. In the United States, subnational governance mainly refers to cities and states. After Donald Trump was elected in 2016, the US saw a large increase in pressure on subnational environmental efforts. Part of this was the creation of the "America Is All In" movement spearheaded by a coalition of subnational leaders in 2017. Local activity increased as a result of the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement with the creation of the "We Are Still In" coalition and the "America's Pledge" analytic initiative that merged in 2021 to form "America Is All In."

When Donald Trump was last elected, he pulled the US out of the Paris Agreement on climate, which resulted in no delegation being sent to the COPs during his years in office. He has made the same promise this term—no Paris Agreement for the US. More people than I can count asked me about my thoughts on the election while at COP. Questions ranged from "What is it like" to "How do you feel" to "What is the US thinking? Again?" The United States' work at COP29 seemed to be tainted by this inevitable withdrawal. I went into COP desperate for hope and I looked to the US delegation for it. Across the two weeks I attended every session I could that was hosted by the US delegation and other subnational groups to try and conceptualize a path forward for climate work in the US under another Trump administration that has promised to "drill baby drill" as part of their 2024 campaign (Martinez and Mai, 2024).

Once again, the role of subnational governance in the US has been placed at the forefront of an international conference. The US delegation had a few key messages that were repeated throughout the conference; all seemed to be connected to the results of the election. First off, the delegation emphasized that their focus had not changed as a result of the election and they still planned to accomplish as much as they could in the next two weeks, as well as the next two months while the Biden administration was still in office. They made sure to invoke the achievements of the last four years and especially the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). John Podesta, special envoy to President Biden and head of the US delegation at COP29, stated that the IRA had a "Trump-proof" backbone by nature, because many people had learned from

his actions during his previous administration when he rolled back many environmental initiatives, like leaving the Paris Agreement. Furthermore, Podesta and others emphasized the bipartisan nature of the IRA, which they hoped could not be undone by a party and administration change (US Department of the Treasury, 2024). Many delegates, throughout the conference, referenced how 80% of funding from the IRA was sent to red states.

Beyond a US-centric lens, I heard many people both talk and articulate concern about the long-term nature of the Paris goals. Many of the goals and agreements being set at COP29 were for 2030, 2035, and beyond. Not only are the goals bigger than those of any one country, but these long-term deals should outlast the next administration. My critique of this perspective is how much it embraces the slow nature of COPs on an issue that is very pressing. It feels like they are relieving the US of responsibility for the next four years, because we have "survived it before." Across the board at COP, the sense of urgency from the Global South was much higher than the Global North. The US delegation's final point of emphasis was on the role of subnational governance. As Dave Cavell, Head of External Affairs Special Presidential Envoy for Climate in the Office of the U.S. The Department of State put it, the states are "where the rubber meets the road — or the sustainably produced rubber rather," he joked. The role of the subnational seems to be a lesson learned from the previous Trump administration, where the states were able to be more effective in the climate realm than the federal government was. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the states were able to rally to send a message to the rest of the world that even if the U.S. was not in the Paris Agreement, America was still all in.

At COP29, there was a strong U.S. subnational presence, including mayors, governors, and more. Part of my quest to find "hope" at COP led me to talks where governors, mayors, representatives, and more spoke about their experience conducting climate work at the state level. These subnational leaders were easily accessible and willing to speak with me regarding the election and more. The Governor of Washington State, Jay Inslee, spoke on one panel that was particularly impactful. He reminded the audience that we, being states, "always go faster than the federal government, we are really super-national now." As a path of hope, the role of states cannot be overlooked. My interest in law at COP led me to the critical topic of top-down or bottom-up efforts, in which subnational efforts can qualify as relatively bottom-up.

People can relate to the local level. It is accessible. The federal and international levels can often feel depersonalized. One of the most impactful parts of COP for me was seeing people I had only read about in the news, in person. Being in the same room as someone, watching them interact with friends, eat a sandwich, run late to a meeting—all of these are so very human. In many ways, the power of the local is in the human element. Subnational leaders were primarily there as observers. They could stay and chat with me after a meeting. They were there mostly as a show of force, not to participate in negotiations. I believe this extends to outside the "COP world." Issues of international climate policy can feel very far out of reach for people. They did for me. Leaving COP, I can see more clearly how "super-national" action and bottom-up efforts can drive just as much change as that at the top, even if the strategy looks different.

One specific example of this came to me as part of a side ring focusing on the Ocean Pavilion. At a meeting titled "Ocean literacy and education as a catalyst for societal transformation in climate action," I was introduced to the Blue Cities Movement. Ronaldo Christofoletti, a professor at the Federal University of São Paulo, shared a book whose main audience is local policy makers (UNESCO Ocean Literacy, 2024). This book is titled "Blue Cities: nature-based solutions for coastal climate resilience" and looks at high-risk coastal cities.

The main idea of this work is that cities are a place of opportunity. Generally speaking, cities are not prepared for extreme events, like the flooding in Valencia, Spain. But Local governance is a place where real change can be made on this front, where private-public partnerships can play an important role and nature-based solutions can offer answers. The local level can be extremely effective. Within the movement, the Blue Cities book can serve as a guide to local lawmakers who have the power to put in place concrete policies at a local level. Christofoletti made sure to emphasize that the national level can take longer and be more challenging, but the local "can be more effective." Interestingly, I left this talk with hope for my original law focus. One point made was that laws were needed for the implementation of nature-based solutions. The panel emphasized how laws can drive changes in behavior, a lesson I will continue to carry with me.

Bareesh told me that spending all of my time at side events would be a shame. I needed to get into some negotiations. At COP, negotiations are how the law gets made and even though they could be tedious, I was more engaged in those negotiations than almost anything else. I tried to follow Article 6 at the beginning but quickly realized how big of a topic that was, so I took to observing the general trends in negotiations rather than following the specific details of each. The procedural nature of these negotiations was fascinating to me, as Bareesh said those debates "over' 'and' or 'or' should be your bread and butter." He was right. My notes on the negotiations were pages long where some side events I attended barely broke one page.

Going into a negotiation often felt like sneaking into a private meeting. I learned that if you asked you probably wouldn't be let in. The key to getting a seat was to get there early and walk in confidently. If you hesitated at the door or seemed like you didn't belong, you'd get the boot. I mastered the power walk past the security at the door. Once inside it was a good idea to grab a headset because often with the rooms so big it was hard to hear each microphone. Some negotiations had countries seated in a circle with televisions inside the circle displaying the speaker. Other negotiations had rows of speakers with the moderators up on a dais of sorts. Though the layout, speakers, topic, and rooms changed, the themes typically did not. The chair, who acts as the moderator, would say a few words and then open up the floor to parties to discuss their thoughts on the most recently released version of the text. Then the "bickering," so to speak, would ensue. Sometimes parties would discuss the inclusion of a word or not, other times they would talk about their frustrations more broadly.

The last negotiation I attended was on the state of the Global Stocktake (GST) and during the first hour of sitting there, countries went around talking about how though not enough progress had been made, they were reluctant to throw away the progress that had been achieved, and that they hoped to not have to push the issue to Bonn. GST is a process that assesses the world's progress on climate action and was utilized at COP28 (UNFCCC, 2024). After about 10 parties spoke, the co-facilitator reminded the group that perhaps they could get more work done to meet these goals if they stopped repeating themselves and proposed changes to the text instead. Canada stepped up and shared notes from a side meeting proposing word changes like "convergence" rather than "agreement" and including bracketed changes to the texts to make work at the summer Intercessional meetings in Bonn more efficient.

The negotiations were slow and sometimes repetitive. To understand what was happening one had to understand why certain countries were supporting what, and what the real-life implications of a small word change would be. The Paris Agreement text sets the precedent that law at a national and then subnational level has to follow. How much money was involved and where it would be spent—these types of things are set at the

international level. Naveeda Khan summarizes the role of international law well. International law "is only as strong as the will to uphold it" she writes, and "There is no agreement without the Parties, and there were no Parties to the agreement without the agreement" (2023:107). The Paris Agreement has received criticism for its lack of teeth, so to speak. We saw this at COP29 towards the end when Parties experienced frustration about the "bad deals" being reached. The Center for International Environmental Law, in a negotiations update, went as far to say that if the Global North does not hold up their "legal duties" they will be called before the highest international court—teeth of sorts. In this case, international law was seen as a solution when the international, national, and subnational compliance to treaties failed.

Perhaps my experience at COP29 is a metaphor that can be applied to COP more broadly. I went in with a goal and focus, only to quickly feel the need to change course. I scrambled for a few days to find my footing, attending as much as I could and frankly running myself ragged. In my confusion, I attempted to follow an individual whom I hoped could right my path. Nothing is quite that simple, and it took longer than expected, which I came to learn is to be expected of a COP conference. Eventually, I was able to get some solid advice and found myself back where I started, this time with a better understanding of how to tie it all together. All of that is to say, I found myself at the end of COP29 in a session titled "Beyond National Frameworks: lawyers and law associations enhancing ambition through legal approaches." This was exactly the session I had been looking for and of course it fell on my last day in the venue. The session's participants discussed specific approaches that lawyers are taking to address climate change and how lawyers and law play into international climate politics. How? The local. Lawyers and law provide critical guidance to individuals and companies at a local level. Caio Borges, the regional director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the FILE Foundation, also spoke on the role of litigation. After the adoption of the Paris Agreement, 2,600 climate litigation cases were brought. These cases can significantly affect the outcome of climate governance. Borges also mentioned a case we had read about in class: Klimaseniorinnen Schweiz and Others v Switzerland. This case made its way to the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in favor of the elderly women suing. The women argued that the Swiss government had "failed to implement sufficient climate policies — violating the women's human rights" (Bell, 2024). This case is extremely significant because it sets a precedent for the right to a healthy environment and that the government must uphold it. Borges also cautioned against putting too much emphasis on litigation as it can be risky and has a high cost. There is the risk of a negative precedent, and so litigation is a tool that can be used in a broader campaign strategy.

The session ended with a "winning formula" that can get people on board with adopting parts of the Paris Agreement. These steps include: keeping in mind to always act for everyone in defense of the rule of law, that the client has a right to be represented, and there is a risk of pushing certain parts too far. Ultimately, clients decide "what we act for" as stated by Dr. Matthias Lang. The session ended with a quote from John Kerrey: "All lawyers are environmental lawyers now, whether we like it or not."

I was shocked at how long it took me to find lawyers at COP29. The International Barr and the American Barr association had been at COP from the beginning, I just wasn't able to find them until the end. I truly believe that my understanding of law was more informed by the side quests I went on to side events, negotiations, and other random areas of interest. Understanding the implementation of lawyers and law at a local level helped me understand the role of the international.

I met Andrea Romero, a New Mexico Representative, outside of a Press Conference

titled “Sub-nationals Stepping up on Climate in the US.” She used her time at the mic to share New Mexico’s priorities and a bit about her background as a lawyer. She stated, “We will be holding the line on all the issues we know the Trump administration will be bringing.” I found the way she spoke compelling. She was clear and effective in her statements, and I felt trust for her after just listening to her talk. At the end of the session, I waited for her outside. She was more than willing to speak to me. We connected on LinkedIn, she gave me her contact details, and we spoke for close to 40 minutes. I end this piece with her because our conversation encapsulated all of my COP interests perfectly. We covered ground from law to the sub-national aspects, to being a woman in the sphere of both. Andrea started off by emphasizing the importance of state constitutions, many of which faced ballot measures raising important social justice concerns across the country during this election cycle. In the context of an incoming Trump administration “dismantling the federal government,” the states play an even more important role. In terms of law, it is expensive to litigate. “Local governments are doing the right thing” she said and added that it is often easier to “just change the law.” This is why Andrea, while in office, decided to attend law school, a choice she sees as one of the best she ever made. “We’re sending the troops to law school,” she joked. When human rights are on the line, lawyers can hold that line. Often the judiciary is left out of the conversation because it can be so time-consuming and long-term. Andrea looked me in the eye and said, “defending people,” reminding them that “your rights matter,” and “we will hold the line for you” is what this work and COP should be all about. I will never forget that.

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