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[Dachzeile]

COP28 in Dubai: Greenwashing or Genuine Ambitions?

The agreement reached at the recent COP28 conference has been hailed as the dawn of a new era in the transition to renewable energy. The Guardian newspaper concurred, headlining its story on the final agreement: [COP28 landmark deal agreed to 'transition away' from fossil fuels](#). Simultaneously, critical voices from indigenous communities and environmental organizations have dismissed the event as "business as usual." The host country, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), derives its prosperity mainly from fossil fuels and finite resources, and the UAE's presidency added another layer of complexity to the conference.

During the opening ceremony, the COP presidency emphasized its ambitions, urging the global community to pursue the ambitious goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels. Despite these commitments, a mixed picture emerged on the ground in Dubai. For us as participant observers, the experience on site was associated with numerous tensions and contradictions, which we would like to reflect upon here. Our impressions raised questions for us about the local leadership's actual understanding of sustainability and the associated ambitions. The impressive number of skyscrapers and the feeling of limitless resource utilisation reinforced this ambivalence. The glittering facades of the hotels and shopping malls as well as the omnipresence of luxury goods such as sports cars and gold jewellery stood in contrast to ideas of resource conservation or even sufficiency as well as other questions of efficiency and consistency, let alone compliance with (planetary) boundaries. And the facts speak for themselves: With an annual per capita energy consumption of 148,577 kilowatt hours, the [UAE ranks 4th among 211 countries or territories in terms of energy consumption](#). By comparison, Germany – which is hardly a low energy consumer – ranks 40th, with an annual per capita energy consumption of 40,977 kilowatt hours. In a city known for superlatives such as the Burj Khalifa and the Burj al Arab, the tallest building in the world and the only hotel with seven stars, a host of billboards and other PR materials lining the streets promised honest ambitions. They conveyed stories of sustainable solutions, intensive collaborations and salutary technologies. Huge billboards next to the motorway and in shining shopping centres emphasised joint efforts for sustainable transformation. For us, this raised the question of whether these billboards were chosen and placed specifically for the COP and to what extent they reflected the actual ambitions and activities of the state.

The COP28 event site (the site of the former Expo 2020 world exhibition), divided into negotiation spaces and exhibition areas, also confronted us with these contradictions. While the spaces for negotiation were quite reserved in design, the "Blue Zone" for accredited organisations and, above all, the freely accessible "Green Zone" for observers were emblazoned with a multitude of slogans promising to heal the world. This ambivalence was evident, for example, in two slogans: "Let's think

! Zum Aktualisieren der Textelemente, Zitation markieren und dann F9 drücken !

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without limit" and "Let's keep 1.5°C within reach", which reflect two perspectives that may not be realised at the same time.

The first slogan, "Let's think without limit", embodies the dynamic spirit of innovation and unbounded progress often associated with cities like Dubai. It reflects the spirit of boundlessness and constant striving for growth, characterised by imposing architecture and futuristic technologies. The second slogan, "Let's keep 1.5°C within reach", on the other hand, expresses the urgent need to limit global warming – an objective which, according to relevant bodies such as the IPCC, calls for the uptake of sustainable practices, including the transformation of lifestyles and, crucially, the curtailment of material consumption.

The question of whether this was an authentic conviction or a form of "greenwashing" remained open to us. However, the two slogans reflected the contrasting forces present at COP28 - one that underlines the unlimited potential and innovation, and the other that focused on the concrete and limited measures to tackle climate change, in particular advocating a reduction of current resource-intensive practices. It was a contradictory duality that not only existed on the posters, but also highlighted the fundamental challenges facing Dubai and the entire global community in terms of sustainability and climate action. This tension between sustainability discourses of ecological modernisation through growth and innovation and those which emphasise planetary boundaries and limiting human impacts made it clear that the answer to the climate crisis probably lies somewhere in between. One could interpret the co-existence of these two slogans as a call to overcome contradictions and find ways to balance innovation and restriction in order to meet the pressing challenges facing our planet. However, we were unable to assess whether and how this connection is actually being sought or practised. At the very least, however, it raised the concern that the two paths exist side by side, rather disconnected and antagonistic.

Following the finalisation and adoption of the final agreement by the COP presidency, it is clear that there is a firm commitment to move away from fossil fuels by 2050 and to increase the promotion of renewable energies. At the same time, an [editorial in the journal Nature argues that the phrase "transition away from fossil fuels" is far too weak](#), especially when compared to the stricter wording of a "phase-out", and that scientific findings show that a faster phase-out is unavoidable. In an interview with The Guardian, University of Pennsylvania climatologist and geophysicist [Professor Michael Mann criticised the lack of an agreement to phase out fossil fuels](#): "It's like promising your doctor that you will 'transition away from doughnuts' after being diagnosed with diabetes". Moreover, agreeing to targets set in the distant future can boost the standing of actors in this political space but does not necessarily translate into effective action.. Wording on carbon capture and the existence of "loopholes" for fossil fuels such as gas also give rise to further questions.

For us as sustainability researchers, it seems important to clarify whether the statements made by the COP28 presidency and other actors at the COP were primarily aimed at cultivating a certain image, or possibly even drawing the attention of the global community in a direction that is not in line with their own actions. The extreme ambivalence that we experienced at the COP, and indeed in many other arenas of sustainability discourse, left us in doubt as to which statements and announcements can actually be believed and trusted. The current agreement is another good example of this. Fossil fuels – the elephant in the room at previous negotiations – have finally been explicitly included and mentioned in the text. At the same time, however, the text contains so many "loopholes" that the actual work of "transitioning away" from fossil fuels is only now really beginning and it remains to be seen whether this can succeed due to the different interests involved. A research approach based on transparent, data-driven evidence could help shed more light on the discrepancy between stated intentions and their actual realisation, and thus help to build trust in collective action for global sustainability, particularly in relation to efforts to mitigate and adapt to global warming.