

COP 27: The Commitment of Cities and the Limits of Nation-States

Ricardo Martínez, Senior Research Fellow, Global Cities Programme, CIDOB



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The victory of the fossil fuels industry in the text of the final declaration of COP27 in Sharm el-Sheikh is a reminder of the limits of nation-states. The poor results of the conference reveal the blatant imbalance between actors who are truly engaged in climate action and others who are trying to obstruct the energy transition. While cities are in the forefront of the struggle against climate change and should be recognised as such, the real winners at COP27 are the hydrocarbon producers and industry.

COP27 has gone down in history as a positive event because of the agreement to establish a fund for compensating losses and damages caused by climate change in the most vulnerable countries. Yet the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting joins a long list of climate conferences where countries have not been able to come to agreement over the most ambitious goals. In particular, the **final declaration** failed to include a call to gradually phase down the use of all fossil fuels. Neither did it address the need, backed by scientific evidence, to reach the peak of global emissions in 2025 and then to dramatically scale down. And all this happened despite the willingness of many countries, including the active engagement of such heavyweight actors as the European Union and India, in trying to raise the level of global commitment.

Given the increasingly dire effects of the climate emergency, the inability of the international community to come to agreement on achieving faster emissions cuts is remarkable. The key to understanding this dilemma lies in the unwavering defence of the prerogatives of national sovereignty by countries in an era notable for complex and global problems requiring collaborative efforts. In a multilateral architecture that is deeply rooted in the vision of the nation-state, there is a glaring imbalance between actors who are truly engaged in climate action and others who are trying to obstruct the energy transition. Comparison of the capacity for advocacy of the fossil fuels industry and that of cities in the framework of Sharm el-Sheikh's negotiations is the most striking evidence of this imbalance.

According to a **study** published during the conference, twenty-nine national governments included more than 600 fossil fuel industry lobbyists in their official delegations. The United Arab Emirates topped this particular list. This consideration is relevant because this country will

host COP28 in Dubai, thus giving some idea of the pressure the industry will exert in next year's meeting as well. The total number of lobbyists is greater than that of representatives of local governments included in the national delegations present in Sharm el-Sheikh.

This greater representation of the fossil fuels industry *vis-à-vis* cities explains the degree to which they influenced the final declaration. They managed to eliminate mention of the aforementioned urgently needed emission reductions, while also being able to include references to “low-emission energy” and a “clean energy mix”, thus paving the way for a very broad concept that includes the possibility to continue generating emissions, for example by means of gas combustion. Cities, however, were only able to achieve one direct reference in the framework of the urgent need to foster multilevel climate action.

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Nevertheless, contrary to what the final declaration might suggest, cities have shown to be much more committed to fight climate change and, still more striking, more ambitious than countries. It is estimated that the current pledges of countries under the Paris Agreement will bring the planet to 2.5°C global warming by the end of the century, way beyond the safety threshold of 1.5°C. Conversely, the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, for example, an alliance with more than 12,000 members, calculates that the total result of the mitigation goals of their cities could reduce global emissions by 4.1 GtCO₂e by 2050. This is no trifling amount when one considers that it is equivalent to 80% of the annual emissions of the United States, the second most contaminating country in the world after China.

Since fossil fuels are the major cause of global warming, how is it possible that this same industry has greater powers of influence and representation than cities at the COP conferences? The answer obliges one to unravel the conflict between the need to confront the climate change multilaterally and the particular interests of nation-states. It is estimated that fossil fuels account for 85% of subsidies at the global level. Moreover, 19 of the world's 26 biggest oil and gas companies are wholly or partially owned by countries. In a market structured around the convergence of public and private interests, nation-states invest enormous resources in highly

contaminating companies to keep them competitive in a framework that revolves around the strategic interests asserted by countries exercising national sovereignty.

The action of cities on the ground is freer in comparison with the interests and dependencies of nation-states. Furthermore, since they concentrate between **67% and 72%** of global emissions, cities will play an expanding role in an increasingly urban world. Since states are clearly unable to act alone, the time has come to rethink the present system of global governance and to encourage collaborative efforts that can leverage cities' high levels of commitment. Unlike the fossil fuels industry, cities are in the forefront of the struggle against climate change and should be recognised as such.