Taking Stock of COP29: Means and priorities going forward with International Cooperation on Sustainability

Taking stock of what was achieved and not achieved at COP29, held in Baku, Azerbaijan, November 12-24, 2024, it is imperative to reflect on ways forward for international Climate Negotiations along with efforts to step up international collaboration on the sustainability agenda more broadly. These considerations need to take account of major ongoing changes in the context for international collaboration in this area, including both the rapidly worsening manifestations of the environmental consequences of an unsustainable economy, and the spurt of disinformation and political backlashes with undercut the support for policy action.

The big picture

The main outcome of the Climate Negotiations was sealed by the participating countries on November 24 after two weeks of tireless and partly dramatic exchanges and negotiations. In the end, a New Collective Quantified Goal on climate finance (NCQG) was agreed, potentially setting the scene for follow-through during the next decade.

The outcome essentially amounts to the developed countries assuming the lead in mobilising at least $300 billion annually as a contribution to the efforts of developing countries, as part of a wider objective to engage all relevant actor categories, such as the private sector, to scale up financing to developing countries in this context to at least $1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

A hard-fought compromise

The amount eventually agreed represented a significant scale-back from the levels that had been considered necessary and expected by many parties at the outset of the negotiations. A common pledge among scientists and multilateral organisations had rather been in the range of $900-1000 billion from 2025, reaching some $1.5 trillion by 2030.

To place the agreed amounts in perspective, fossil fuel subsidies across developed countries in 2022 amounted to 3.6% of their aggregate GDP, while a target of $300 billion in comparison amounts to less than half a percent. At one point during the negotiations, some 60 countries walked out of the meeting, in despair over the down-scaled ambitions, coupled with backlashes in other areas, such as ambitions to cut back on fossil fuel dependency in energy systems.

Moreover, in contrast to the previous $100 billion specific mandate for developed countries to pay up, this new goal merely commits them to take the lead. Furthermore, considering inflation since the 2009 goal and the new flows counting towards this target, what at first appears as a tripling of the previous ambitions, are by many soberly viewed as little less than a watering down of what had previously been agreed. This is particularly the case as the past period has been marked by significant mishaps among many when it comes to delivering on what had been promised, now to be followed by formulations that make it more difficult to enforce delivery.

Upgraded attention to the quality of finance

Although the stipulated amount represented a disappointment in quantitative terms, the upgrading in this respect arguably reached the limit for what could politically be assimilated by the parties at the present time, and offers in effect widened scope for tangible resource transfers in support of more collaborative and equitable efforts to deal with the issues. Rather than the precise amount, the critical issue at the end of the day less has to do with the amounts pledged, or even disbursed, and more about how resources are transferred and to what effect.

Tangible progress was in fact achieved when it comes to ensuring transparency and access, recognising the challenges confronting developing countries including debt distress and the costs of capital, the need to embed climate action with strategies to combat poverty and underdevelopment, as well as when it comes to engaging financial institutions and the private sector to play their part.

Having said that, there was no consensus or conclusion on the terms of which investment are to be provided, as the degree to which transfers will be on concessional terms, by way of loans or grants, or link to a resolution of the outstanding challenges related to the prevailing indebtedness of many countries around the world. This is particularly serious at a time of severe stand-off between notably the US and western countries on the one hand, and China on the other hand, on the processes of effectuating debt relief, which has rendered the IMF and the Club of Paris much less effective in instituting debt relief.

On a separate track, a significant effort was made to improve market mechanisms surrounding carbon emissions reductions, notably so-called carbon credits and the terms under which reductions by some can be offset by emissions by others. This is particularly important at a time when the reliability of the United States government and also some other governments is in serious doubt, placing high emphasis on the need for market forces to strengthen in support of sustainability to strengthen on their own terms. The significance of what was agreed in this area remains to be seen.

COP track ahead

At the end of the day, COP29 in Baku needs to be viewed in the context of framing the best possible basis for the next stage of international negotiations, at the time when the adverse consequences of humanity's failure to ensure sustainability is become increasingly obvious for all to see although, at the same time, the ferocity and madness of so-called "climate scepticism" is about to reach new hights as well. Next, the "Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T" aims to enable the COP 29 and 30 Presidencies, Azerbaijan and Brazil, work together through 2025 to present a menu of options at COP 30 to take next steps. Additionally, coordination is meant to be arranged with the outcomes of COP15 on biodiversity, which took place in Cartagena in October 2024.
Hopes are high for the next stage to enable improved coordination on the so far partly separated agendas of addressing climate change and the biodiversity crisis, as a basis for strengthening both the amount of resources dedicated and effectively mobilised in support of biodiversity, and also to improve the mechanisms for innovation and cooperation, including broad-based stakeholder engagement.

Areas requiring adjusted approaches

To improve the outlook for tangible must needed progress in key areas, the importance of the following need to be awarded high attention;

- Scope for the private sector, including business and the financial sector, to assume a greater role, where market forces attain much sharper rewards for contributions to sustainability of the potential contributions of technology and innovation can be realised
- Measures to induce stronger public support and engagement, entailing less of degrading criticism but rather means of instilling a sense of responsibility as well as empowerment among citizens, requiring mobilising new voices, arenas for interaction such as culture and entertainment, as well as strategies to counter disinformation, greenwashing, and populism
- Greater consistency and synergy must be achieved in tackling the major issues threatening sustainability, spanning climate change, biodiversity loss, management of land and water resources, as well as upgrading conservation of vulnerable remaining precious natural habitats, placing emphasis on maintaining public goods functions
- Greater emphasis on measures to support community development, including the rights of indigenous peoples who stand on the fence to defend much of what remains of our collective natural heritage, as well as broad-based improvement in education, health, job creation and the conditions for entrepreneurship facing the still rapidly expanding young population of developing countries.
- A strengthening of infrastructure and policy coordination in support of transitioning energy systems, including by addressing the bottlenecks to electrification. The latter requires strengthened synergy between shifting to renewable energy sources with technological advances to ensure more effective and greener energy storage as well as improved energy distribution. Without these advancing in parallel, greening runs into conflict with the economy, undercutting public support for sustainability while also eroding long term competitiveness, as called out by the Draghi-report

- Shifting the emphasis in private sector engagement from today's disclosure-oriented focus to nailing down effective terms for impact investment backed by solid verification mechanisms and improved incentives for frontrunners vs. disincentives for laggards/greenwashing on critical sustainability issues
- Pave the way for novel vehicles to bypass today's financial intermediaries to channel resources more effectively straight to the ground, in support of tangible contributions to sustainability where the focus is entirely placed on verification of impact rather than financial returns for investors.

Examples of concrete initiatives under way

Efforts need to be pursued at multiple levels to ensure progress in each of these areas. Much can be achieved by different stakeholders and actor competences joining forces to underpin, advance, and pick up on innovative prospective solutions to major issues.
Examples include building a better understanding of the conditions under which private sector investment and support of sustainability can be mobilised and scaled. Novel means for measurement and validation of impacts represent one facet.

A viable strategy to unleash an imminent proactive large-scale deployment of NbS, adequately coordinated and adapted with green and blue infrastructure and biodiversity resilient to heat and high-water retention, should be taken forward to counter the ongoing and otherwise inevitable destruction under way of much of the world's remaining pristine wild lands.
A multi-faceted approach that engages the private sector alongside key stakeholders, with active co-creation by local communities, is essential to make this NbS initiative practically viable and impactful.

Satellite technology is advancing rapidly, offering capabilities to serve as a comprehensive landscape observatory. With detailed imagery analysis, satellites can now assess flood susceptibility, canopy coverage, soil permeability, urban heat islands, and more. However, a conscientious effort is needed to convert data into actionable insights that can drive meaningful interventions. Leveraging space technology creatively will be critical in generating precise, real-time information to meet the needs for diagnostics, awareness-raising, planning, design, implementation, and monitoring.

Additionally, a comprehensive feedback, verification, and certification scheme is essential to establish an effective reward structure, drawing private sector investment into long-term, sustainable value creation.
Action-oriented research should be pursued to unravel what is essential for satellite technology to effectively support the functionality, capacity-building, incentivizing, and building of trust that is crucial for scaling private sector investment in nature conservation and biodiversity more generally. The aim here is a ready-to-deploy vehicle that transitions "From Data to Action: Scaling Private Investment in Biodiversity with Satellite-Verified Impact.

In alignment with these priorities, collaborative efforts are underway to establish an organic ecosystem of diverse stakeholders connected through strategic partnerships. This ecosystem aims to mobilize private sector engagement and investment by providing innovative financial mechanisms and platforms that bridge the gap between individual contributors, corporations, and on-the-ground impact projects. Success in this regard calls for the build-up of capacity and instruments that make contributing to sustainability not only accessible but also impactful, offering transparency, validation, and measurable outcomes.

Among other efforts, our organisation currently engages intensively in an ongoing initiative that is presently focused on unleashing a comprehensive set of such activities across Africa. In the subsequent phase, the objective is to expand further with reach to other parts of the developing world. By leveraging digital platforms, advanced technologies, and a strong validation framework, it seeks to channel funding into critical areas such as nature-based solutions (NbS), green and blue infrastructure, and biodiversity conservation. A key component of this approach is the ability to ensure that every contribution—from micro-donations to large-scale investments—is directed to projects with verified impacts, fostering trust and accountability across all levels of involvement.

The initiative also prioritises building local capacity, empowering communities to manage and implement projects effectively while adhering to global standards of transparency and accountability. By integrating cutting-edge validation tools, such as satellite-verified monitoring systems and impact-tracking technologies, this ecosystem ensures that contributions are not only impactful but also demonstrably effective in driving sustainability goals.

The framework under development creates a virtuous cycle, where contributors are incentivised through visible, measurable impacts and a system of rewards that aligns financial returns with long-term ecological and social benefits.

This coordinated effort aims to catalyse a transformational shift in how sustainability projects are funded, validated, and scaled, offering emerging markets the tools and frameworks to achieve tangible progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By fostering collaboration across sectors, this initiative is paving the way for innovative, scalable solutions that address the dual challenges of climate change and social equity while ensuring meaningful, on-the-ground outcomes.