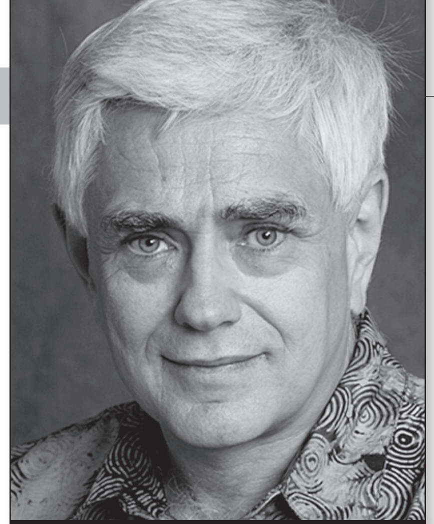
While the World Burns, Dubious Evasions in Climate Negotiations



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Last year, global temperatures reached the highest level ever measured, shattering records, in the words of Indian meteorologist Akshay Deoras, "by a humongous margin." We are already close to warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, the desirable limit agreed at the 2015 Paris climate conference to forestall dangerous global warming. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has denounced governments for "runaway climate carelessness." Countries are, he lamented last year, "doubling down on fossil fuel production . . . double trouble for people and the planet."

Let's start with the host of the 2023 28th Conference of the Parties to the UN Climate Convention, the United Arab Emirates. The UAE appointed the head of the country's national oil company, ADNOC, as COP28's president. ADNOC is the world's seventh largest oil producer, accounting for 4.1 percent of global production. Just before the UAE was named COP28's host in 2022, ADNOC proclaimed new investments of $150 billion to more than double its production of natural gas and oil, adding 7.5 billion barrels of oil equivalent to global output. To meet the International Energy Agency's suggested scenario of net zero global carbon emissions by 2050, no new oil and gas extraction should have been approved after 2021. Ninety percent of ADNOC's expansion goal is totally incompatible with the IEA's analysis.

Increased fossil fuel development puts the lie to countries' carbon commitments

ADNOC is hardly alone. Saudi Aramco, QatarEnergy, ExxonMobil, Chevron, and the French oil giant Total all announced major production expansion plans in recent years. A significant part of the production expansion of ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Total is taking place offshore of Guyana and Suriname, abetted by over a billion dollars of loans for government support, infrastructure for oil and gas transport, and technical assistance in managing oil revenues provided to these countries by the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. Late last year, rich countries and developing nations agreed that a proposed $100 billion Loss and Damage Fund to compensate poorer nations for climate change harm would be managed on an interim basis by none other than the World Bank. As long as the bank continues to support fossil fuel production expansion, it is grotesque to entrust it with managing the new climate harm fund.

In November, the United Nations Environment Program and the Stockholm Environment Institute released their fourth annual "Production Gap" study examining the disconnect between hortatory pledges of governments to reduce fossil fuel emissions, and alarming simultaneous plans of most major fossil fuel producing nations to increase production by 2030 more than 110 percent above the level consistent with these commitments. Specifically, coal production will continue to increase through 2030 in Germany, Colombia, the United States, Australia, Russia, Indonesia, and India (among others), reaching a level 460 percent above "global levels consistent with limiting warming to 1.5º C." Oil and gas production will rise 29 and 82 percent higher, respectively, in 2030, than levels consistent with achieving a 1.5º C target.

According to the report, "For each fossil fuel, the combined levels of production being planned by the 10 high-income countries alone would already exceed global 1.5º C-consistent pathways by 2040, putting an equitable [energy] transition at risk."

Brazil, Indonesia, and Colombia have recently achieved substantial reductions in deforestation rates, certainly a positive trend. But if these same nations, together with developed and Arabian/Persian Gulf nations, are simultaneously ramping up fossil fuel production, we are still on a path to climate disaster.

Some governments in lieu of greater reduction of fossil fuel production and use emphasize the potential of carbon capture and sequestration and carbon offset trading. A recent study by the *Guardian* and the Boston-based research organization Corporate Accountability examined the top 50 international carbon emission offset projects as measured by volume of offsets, accounting for a third of the global voluntary carbon market. The study concluded that 39 of the 50 were "likely junk" in terms of actual carbon reductions, and eight others were "problematic." Wildfires from 2015 to 2022 destroyed 95 percent of the forests set aside as carbon offsets under California's climate law.

Already in 2007 and 2009 studies conducted by MIT and Harvard had concluded that CCS cost and infrastructure challenges made it an impractical option compared with a more rapid transition to carbon-friendly renewable energy. The UNEP and SEI report warns of "the risks and uncertainties" of CCS, calling for "total phase-out of coal production and use" by 2040 and for reduction of oil and gas production and use by 75 percent in 2050 from 2020 levels.

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