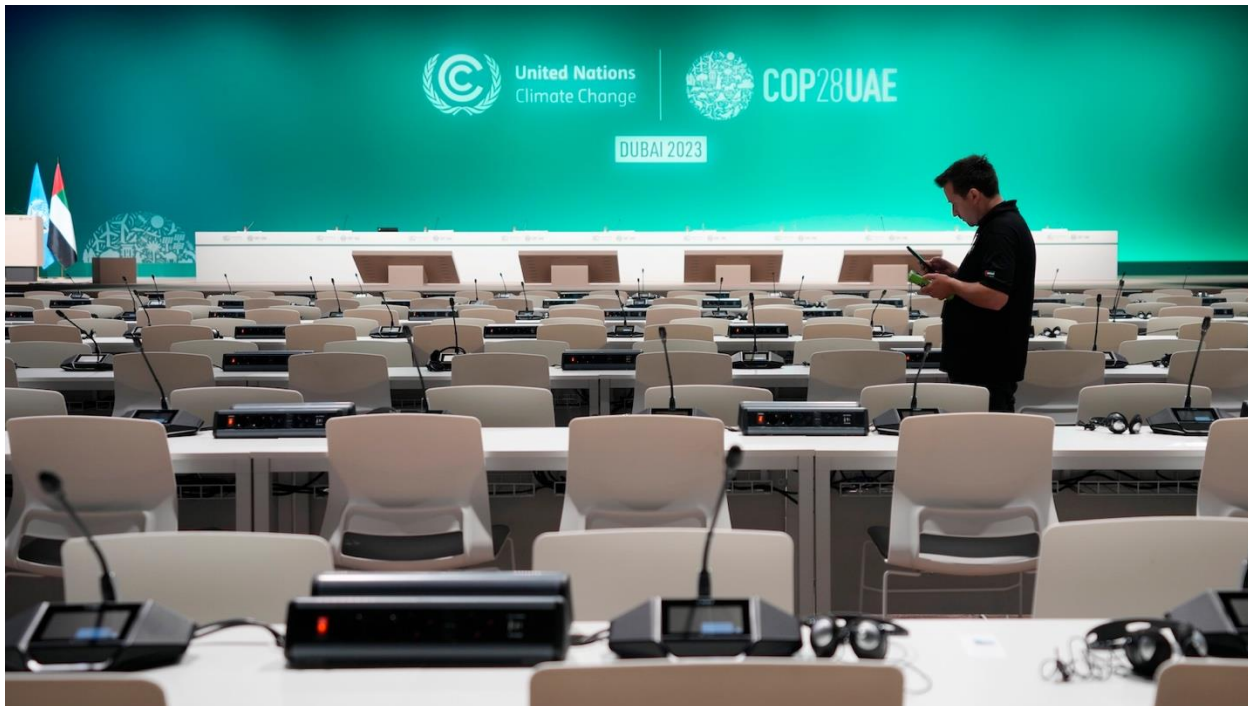


Here's what's at stake for Indigenous peoples at COP28

Negotiations happen behind closed doors, but for Indigenous peoples, “A lot of work happens in the hallways.”



A worker sets up ahead of the COP28 U.N. Climate Summit, Wednesday, Nov. 29, 2023, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. AP Photo / Kamran Jebreili

[Anita Hofscheider](#), Senior Staff Writer, Nov 29, 2023

Ozawa Bineshi Albert wants the world to stop relying on fossil fuels. So last year, the co-executive director of [Climate Justice Alliance](#) flew from the U.S. to Egypt to make her voice heard at COP27, the international conference on climate change where world leaders gather to negotiate new commitments to battle the climate crisis.

But at COP27, Albert, who is Anishinaabe and Yuchi, noticed that Indigenous peoples like herself were outnumbered by fossil fuel lobbyists. She was also struck by how many people touted nuclear energy as an alternative to burning oil and gas.

“Nuclear is one of the most dirty, damaging energy sources, particularly for Indigenous people,” she thought. “It touches Indigenous communities all along its life cycle from where it gets mined, to where it gets processed, to where nuclear power plants are placed, to where nuclear waste gets stored.”

That observation was just one indication of how the perspectives, and experiences, of Indigenous peoples aren't always reflected in the broader environmental movement. As COP28 kicks off in the United Arab Emirates this week, hundreds of Indigenous advocates are making their way to Dubai with the hope of ensuring that their

communities aren't overlooked by global leaders.

Though the conference doesn't officially begin until Thursday, the work has already started. Jennifer Tauli Corpuz is Kankanaey-Igorot from the Philippines and is managing director of policy at [Nia Tero](#). She spent eight hours Tuesday in an auditorium with about 350 fellow members of the Indigenous Peoples Caucus, a delegation representing Native peoples, working on the details of a two-minute opening statement that the Caucus will be allowed to give during COP28's opening ceremony. Corpuz says it's not easy to distill everyone's perspectives and issues into such a short statement and the work required interpreters in five languages.

Get caught up on COP28

What is COP28? Every year, climate negotiators from around the world gather under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to assess countries' progress toward reducing carbon emissions and limiting global temperature rise.

The 28th Conference of the Parties, or COP28, is taking place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, between November 30 and December 12 this year.

Read more: [The questions and controversies driving this year's conference](#)

What happens at COP? Part trade show, part high-stakes negotiations, COPs are annual convenings where world leaders attempt to move the needle on climate change.

While activists up the ante with disruptive protests and industry leaders hash out deals on the sidelines, the most consequential outcomes of the conference will largely be negotiated behind closed doors. Over two weeks, delegates will pore over language describing countries' commitments to reduce carbon emissions, jostling over the precise wording that all 194 countries can agree to.

What are the key issues at COP28 this year?

Global stocktake: The 2016 landmark Paris Agreement marked the first time countries united

behind a goal to limit global temperature increase. The international treaty consists of 29 articles with numerous targets, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing financial flows to developing countries, and setting up a carbon market. For the first time since then, countries will conduct a "global stocktake" to measure how much progress they've made toward those goals at COP28 and where they're lagging.

Fossil fuel phaseout or phasedown: Countries have agreed to reduce carbon emissions at previous COPs, but have not explicitly acknowledged the role of fossil fuels in causing the climate crisis until recently. This year, negotiators will be haggling over the exact phrasing that signals that the world needs to transition away from fossil fuels. They may decide that countries need to phase *down* or phase *out* fossil fuels or come up with entirely new wording that conveys the need to ramp down fossil fuel use.

Read more: [How fossil fuel phrasing played out at COP27](#)

Loss and damage: Last year, countries agreed to set up a historic fund to help developing nations deal with the so-called loss and damage that they are currently facing as a result of climate change. At COP28, countries will agree on a number of nitty-gritty details about the fund's operations, including which country will host the fund, who will pay into it and withdraw from it, as well as the makeup of the fund's board.

Read more: [The difficult negotiations over a loss and damage fund](#)

Dive deeper:

[The decade-old broken climate promise that looms over COP28](#)

[The world is careening toward 3 degrees of warming, UN says ahead of climate conference](#)

[Developing countries need at least \\$215 billion a year for climate adaptation](#)

Apart from ending fossil fuel reliance, Indigenous advocates at COP28 want to ensure that funding to offset the impacts of climate change reaches their communities; ensure Indigenous knowledge is seen as a solution to

climate change; and prevent governments and private actors from violating their rights, especially as those actors pursue green energy projects.

Corpuz said the caucus plans to approve advocacy papers outlining their positions Wednesday. Then comes the work of convincing negotiators to listen. But it's not easy.

The estimated 350 Indigenous people at COP28 is an attendance record for Native advocates, but it's still far fewer than the 600 fossil fuel lobbyists who attended COP27 last year. As well, the most important work at the conference, negotiating the exact language of international climate change treaties, gets done behind closed doors among designated representatives from United Nations member countries.

Corpuz estimates that perhaps 20 of the 350 Indigenous people at COP28 this week have government badges that allow them access to negotiations. But even then, because they aren't credentialed delegates representing a negotiating party, they are only able to watch and listen, not speak, she said.

Still, it's an improvement over past years when Indigenous peoples' representatives [were locked out from even more rooms](#), said Corpuz. At least now Indigenous representatives will be able to hear the details of the negotiations, the perspectives of international representatives, and carry the information back for advocates to lobby government delegates. "A lot of the work of the Indigenous Caucus happens in the hallways," Corpuz said.

A key question that's expected to be decided this year is how much money wealthy nations like the U.S. should pay in order to cover the costs of climate disasters in the Global South, an initiative known as the loss and damage fund. One study estimates that nations in the Global North are [responsible for 92 percent of excess carbon emissions each year, compared with 8 percent in the Global South.](#)

"What's at stake is how these finance mechanisms are going to impact and be accessible to Indigenous communities and other impacted communities, how they will be funded, and to what levels will they be funded," Albert said. "And will those resources actually get to communities and not be taken up by agencies that will administer them?"

Eriel Deranger of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation in Canada and executive director of [Indigenous Climate Action](#), thinks that it makes sense that wealthy countries would be paying for climate impacts, but Deranger also wants the money to be available to Indigenous people no matter what country they live in due to already extreme [climate impacts, many of which are exacerbated by colonization and land theft.](#)

"If Canada, for example, or the U.S. is contributing to the loss and damage fund and we don't have access to it as Indigenous people in North America or in the Global North, where are we going to see those kind of climate reparations and restitution for the damages that we are facing from the climate crisis?" Deranger asked.

But money is only part of the equation, said Kandi White, a citizen of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nations in the U.S. and program director at the [Indigenous Environmental Network](#), which sent a 25-member delegation to Dubai. "For Indigenous peoples, it's not just about the money, but it's also about the return of our sovereignty over our lands," said White.

That sovereignty has been threatened by land grabs, including [recent land deals between a United Arab Emirates company and five African nations](#) for the carbon credit trade, White said. The land deals were touted as a way to help conserve land and offset pollution, but White is concerned about whether the Indigenous people living there truly consented to the plan as well as how they'll be affected. It's part of a broader pattern of [conservation deals](#) that are

creating [conflict in Indigenous territories around the world](#).

Both Deranger and White, who are in Dubai this week, also hope to establish a grievance procedure through which Indigenous peoples whose rights are infringed upon could hold governments accountable. “We need there to not just be lip service of, ‘We recognize Indigenous rights,’ but we need to see language that has teeth,” Deranger said.

But securing that level of accountability may be an uphill battle. Even when world leaders make promises, they don’t always fulfill them: Wealthy countries [blew a 2020 deadline to spend \\$100 billion a year](#) to help poorer nations cope with climate impacts and make progress toward decarbonization. One study suggested that goal may have been met last year, two years late, even as the world [hurtles toward 3 degrees of warming](#).

The combined challenges — a lack of access to negotiating tables and tepid commitments by global leaders — have fueled disillusionment. Moñeka De Oro, who is Chamorro from the Mariana Islands and co-executive director of the [Micronesia Climate Change Alliance](#), says that last year at COP some Indigenous Caucus

members discussed boycotting the convention, “no longer being a part of these processes that continuously degrade our input,” she said.

De Oro recently helped [draft a declaration for peace, unity, and climate justice in the Pacific](#) to be read at COP that called for a future free of colonialism and militarization. But as much as she believes in that message, she joined a boycott of this year’s convention with [Grassroots Global Justice Alliance](#) protesting the Israeli government’s war on Gaza, and questions whether to attend future meetings.

“If you’re going to continue to continuously be ignored and continuously be just erased from the entire process, I don’t know how much longer we want to be complicit in attending these sorts of things,” she said.

The power imbalances can be discouraging, but Ozawa Bineshi Albert still feels determined.

“COP is not a place that we go to thinking we’re going to get everything we want,” she said. To her, the overarching question is: “How can we make sure that we at least hold the line and make sure the least amount of damage and the least amount of harm is caused to frontline and Indigenous communities?”

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