

How did COP28 fare? Southeast Asian civil society organisations share their thoughts

Op-Ed by Climate Action Network Southeast Asia (CANSEA)

We at Climate Action Network Southeast Asia (CANSEA) recently interviewed several civil society organisations (CSOs) from the region on their views about COP28.

What is their take on the UAE Consensus? What are their views on the Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR) principle? Were marginalised communities well represented at the conference? We asked these questions and a few more.



Image by Brookings Institute

Outcry against weak UAE Consensus

The creme de la creme of COP28 was the UAE consensus, and some welcomed it.

“The UAE consensus responds in part to the concerns and aspirations of Southeast Asia,” Regan Pairojmahakij, senior program officer for landscape collaboration in a changing climate at the Bangkok-based organisation RECOFTC, tells us. “For example, it makes historic advances in committing to the tripling of renewable energy capacity by 2030. Southeast Asia, and Asia in general, has been racing ahead of other regions in renewable energy with Asia accounting for around 60% of global newly installed capacity and 48% of total global renewable energy capacity.

“Regional economies such as Indonesia are well placed to benefit from the transition to renewables with the world’s largest nickel deposits, an essential component of electric



vehicle batteries. With regards to the [Global Stocktake](#) heralded ‘transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems,’ while countries in Southeast Asia remain dependent to some degree on fossil fuels such as coal, they remain less locked into high emitting pathways as countries such as China and India. Thus, their aspirations and challenges differ, with greater scope to pivot swiftly toward deeper decarbonisation,” she says further.

However, the announcement that fossil fuels should be merely reduced, and not phased out completely, was largely met with outcry.

[Critics complain that the consensus is passive in its language, non-committal and not legally binding.](#) The trouble began earlier: COP28 president Sultan Al Jaber is also the chief executive of UAE’s state oil company, Adnoc, which posed a conflict of interest. For example, in a shocking statement during a live online event on 21 November, he claimed that there is “no science” to back up the need for the phasing out of fossil fuels” – a statement which scientists decried as “incredibly concerning” and “verging on climate denial”.

Countries most impacted by the climate crisis say that the weak UAE Consensus has led to another problem: A wishy-washy Loss & Damage Fund.

The announcement of the Loss & Damage Fund, whereby more developed countries pay for the emissions they cause to the planet, was much welcomed after being first mooted three decades ago.

However, our respondents express scepticism on the Fund’s effectiveness and say there needs to be a proper mechanism for the disbursement of the money.

“The operationalisation of the Loss & Damage Fund and the Global Renewables and Energy Efficiency Pledge are two concrete outcomes of the UAE Consensus that are significant for Southeast Asia,” says SG Climate Rally, a climate policy group from Singapore, welcoming the initiative.

“However, given that the region is recognised by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) as being especially at risk of losing settlements and infrastructure to sea-level rise, we think more attention needs to go to ensuring that the pledged funding can reach the countries and communities that need it the most,” they add. “The L&D Fund and other funding mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund need to be designed in an accessible and equitable manner.”

Indonesian Green Advocacy Network, Hijauku.com agrees. Its founder Hizbullah Arief says, “There are two issues that need to be highlighted. The first is how developing countries in

Southeast Asia can access the loss and damage funds for adaptation actions and mitigation funds for just energy transition.”

“So far, we only hear pledges from rich nations without further information on how to access them,” he continues. “There is no deadline yet of when these developed countries will transfer these funds and no mechanisms either to disburse them. We have had enough hearing all of their sweet talks during COPs and it is now time to walk the talk.”

The organisation Youth Advocates for Climate Action Philippines (YACAP) also agrees. YACAP’s National Coordinator Alab Mirasol Ayroso expresses her dismay that the consensus does not reflect the immediate dangers that Southeast Asian countries face, such as floods, typhoons and El Nino. She says reparations need to be increased, and calls for a greater responsibility from more developed nations to do this.



Image by Getty Images

The principle of Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR)

The burden of responsibility on more developed countries to pay for the emissions they cause is embedded in the principle called Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR). All five organisations that we interviewed agree on the importance of CBDR.

However, organisations like SG Climate Rally express concerns that CBDR principles are not being adequately met. “The COP28 outcome does not sufficiently acknowledge the limitations of carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCS) technology in the fight for a just energy transition, as outlined by the International Energy Agency,” they say.

“Similarly, carbon offset projects have been criticised for failing to contribute to actual emissions reductions and in some cases causing harm to Indigenous communities,” the

group adds. “CCUS and carbon offsets should not be allowed to perpetuate the profitability of fossil fuels, and that policy outcomes help channel investments and incentives towards a just energy transition away from fossil fuels.”

For Regan Pairojmahakij from RECOFTC, the buy-in for CBDR can be improved by presenting it in a better angle: “Reframing the problem could present deep decarbonisation as an opportunity for economic and sectoral growth, rather than as a financial burden. Financing from developed countries should be provided to support adaptation and the subsidisation and de-risking of technological and economic costs of the transition to net zero.”



Image by Africanews

Lack of meaningful representation of marginalised groups at COP28

COP28 saw a huge turn-out that included the participation of marginalised groups, namely youth groups and Indigenous Peoples.

“COP28’s International Youth Climate Delegate Program was promising in its commitment to provide youths from Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Indigenous Peoples and other minority groups globally the opportunity to attend COP,” applauds SG Climate Rally.

However, it is hard to say if those numbers actually translated into more meaningful representation.

“Unless given the opportunity to join their countries’ negotiating delegation, youth groups’ participation in COP’s “outside spaces” — Pavilions, side events, and protests — does not



automatically ensure meaningful representation in the “inside spaces” — that is, the actual negotiations,” adds SG Climate Rally.

What tangible steps can future COPs take to improve inclusivity?

SG Climate Rally offers some advice: “Besides more youth representation in country delegations, we would like to see governments become more proactive in engaging youths, especially those in marginalised communities and activism groups, and in incorporating their perspectives into their country’s negotiating positions.”

Indigenous Peoples also felt sidelined at COP28.

“Even at Asia-Pacific Climate Week [the event leading up to COP28], there were discussions but not much open, accessible welcoming spaces for Indigenous Peoples in terms of support, visibility, speaking engagements and sitting at the negotiations table,” Paul Belisario from the International Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self Determination and Liberation (IPMSDL), from the Philippines says, expressing his dismay.

“At COP28, there were dialogues, but [it felt like] tokenism on their part and Indigenous Peoples didn't have a say in that part,” he adds.

He also expresses his disappointment at COP28’s failure to address what he says is the elephant in the room: the issue of attacks and the displacement of Indigenous Peoples which are linked to developments related to energy, plantation and carbon sink, happening in countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

“Prioritising and giving them space to talk and including them in policies and programmes is a big thing,” Belisario explains of the need to include Indigenous Peoples more in climate talks. “Security issues are barely spoken about in the Global Stocktake. The discussion [on Indigenous Peoples] is a lot bigger and real for them in terms of security, human rights and land.”



Image by Reuters

Next steps

SG Climate Rally has this to say on their aspirations for Singapore: “We hope that Singapore continues to improve its climate ambition with every COP, peak our emissions as soon as possible and announce a holistic national strategy to achieve net zero emission.”

The group also emphasises the need for more fruitful collaborations between the Singaporean government and businesses.

“Currently, crucial parts of Singapore's decarbonisation pathway are contingent on technological advancements or international cooperation,” they explain. “Therefore, we hope that our government will be bolder in engaging Singapore's industries to decarbonise through concrete and currently available measures, such as increasing the mandatory carbon tax.

“Additionally, some projects, such as the regional power grid, may have huge environmental impacts in the region. We hope that Singapore can take further accountability for the environmental, biological and social impacts of its development plans, and ensure that Singapore’s continued development does not infringe on the lives and habitats of other Southeast Asian nations.”

Meanwhile, Alab Mirasol Ayroso from YACAP expresses the need for a better grassroots engagement for his country the Philippines to move forward in the transition. “A lot of people in our home country didn't know that talks were happening. When it comes to



problems close to the ground – poverty, high prices, low wages – transitioning away from fossil fuels does not affect people on the ground.”

And for Paul Belisario from IPMSDL, he has this to say: “Moving forward, there’s much more space the state must give and really consult with the grassroots communities. Not just to correct things but to really understand what’s happening.

Hopefully future negotiations will really reflect what needs to be done.”