INTERVIEWS 26.11.2024

‘Many countries in the Global South are bitterly disappointed’

Not a failure, but certainly a disappointment: Yvonne Blos from Baku on the results of COP29, the fight for climate finance and hopes for next year

The UN Climate Change Conference in Baku was shaken right at the start by the announcement that US President-elect Donald Trump was planning to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement once again. What does this mean for global efforts to combat climate change?

In terms of content, this actually has less impact than one would assume. For one thing, the US has already pulled out of the Paris Agreement once under Trump without other countries following suit. And secondly, even under Joe Biden, the US has failed to commit to more ambition or doing its fair share on the most important issue of this conference — climate finance. Nevertheless, right at the start of the conference, we saw that Argentinian President Javier Milei withdrew his delegation from COP29. It is therefore to be feared that there could in fact be a domino effect this time and that other countries, especially those governed by right-wing populists, could follow Trump. That would indeed be disastrous, since the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change as an important multilateral mechanism has so far been remarkably crisis-proof.

Several important heads of state such as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, French President Emmanuel Macron and Brazilian President Lula da Silva did not attend the climate conference. How much did this undermine the COP29?

This has indeed weakened the conference. Many heads of state and government did not see this UN climate conference as particularly important and have already turned their attention to Brazil, where the COP30 will take place next year. This is unfortunate because it shows that climate protection and, above all, climate financing are not a major priority for them. For many countries in the Global South,

however, sufficient financing is vital to their survival if they are to be able to take climate action at all. In addition, the absence of many heads of state also weakened the political momentum at COP29, as they often make political announcements that help to achieve a breakthrough. This was the case at COP26 in Glasgow, for example. And it also weakens the COP itself as one of the few multilateral forums still functioning. However, such forums must be strengthened, especially in these times of increasing global polarisation.

The conference took place in Azerbaijan, a country that is heavily dependent on fossil fuels. How did this influence the discussions on phasing out fossil fuels that were decided at the last COP?

The question of how emissions can be further reduced in order to return to a 1.5-degree pathway was definitely not given enough attention at this COP. It was clear from the outset that the Azerbaijani presidency had no ambitions in this regard. It was actually envisaged that the so-called COP Troika countries – consisting of the current COP presidency (Azerbaijan), the previous one (United Arab Emirates) and the future one (Brazil) – would join forces in order to make progress on this point in particular. However, unlike Brazil, Azerbaijan has not presented a more ambitious national climate protection target. In his opening speech, Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev also caused a stir by describing fossil fuels as a 'gift from God'. Without leadership from the presidency, it will be difficult to persuade other countries to improve their climate targets. All countries are required to tighten up their national reduction targets by February 2025. With the exception of very few countries such as the UK, which announced in Baku that it wants to reduce its emissions by 81 per cent by 2035, there are hardly any countries whose efforts are sufficient in this respect.

Unfortunately, defining a clear path to move away from fossil fuels is also not part of the official negotiating tracks at the climate conferences. At last year's climate conference in Dubai, it was celebrated as a success that the final declaration explicitly called for a move away from fossil fuels - together with a tripling of renewable energies and a doubling of energy efficiency by 2030. However, the Azerbaijani COP presidency did not even envisage such a document.

The Azerbaijani presidency was also problematic due to the difficult human rights situation, which did not allow for open protest on site. This was compounded by a lack of preparation and diplomatic experience with such negotiations. There was therefore a lack of both the will and the ability to anchor the move away from fossil fuels more firmly. As a result, this climate conference took a step backwards in

this important area and was unable to build on the resolutions of the COP28.

One of the main focuses of the conference in Baku was on finance. Are the agreed climate financing targets able to meet the needs?

First of all, it is important to note that industrialised countries have a historic responsibility towards developing countries, which is also clearly set out in the Paris Climate Agreement. This is because developing countries have contributed the least to the climate crisis, but suffer the most from it. Already in the past, industrialised countries have not fulfilled this obligation adequately, as the 100 billion per year in climate financing promised for 2020 was only made available after some delay.

It is also quite clear that this sum is insufficient. On the one hand, the pressure to adapt as a result of the advancing climate crisis is becoming ever greater and therefore more costly. On the other hand, the damage and losses caused by climate disasters are increasing immensely. And even if switching to renewable energies and increasing energy efficiency is now economically viable in many places, these technologies require high initial investments. It is estimated that developing countries need at least $1 trillion a year for these three areas, while climate activists are calling for as much as $5 trillion a year due to the historical debt of industrialised countries.

So if industrialised countries are calling for a rapid reduction in emissions and a move away from fossil fuels in developing countries, it must be clear that this is directly linked to the question of how much support the latter will receive in order to achieve this goal. And it is also clear that the Global South will rightly be less than co-operative if no reliable and sufficient commitments are made here.

Officially, the important negotiating group of developing countries (G77 and China) demanded $1.3 trillion annually by 2035, but the industrialised countries, presumably as a negotiating tactic, only put their own figure of $250 billion annually on the table for the global climate financing target on the last day of negotiations. Nevertheless, the *quality* of climate financing is also important for many countries in the Global South. It should consist of public funds and not private money and loans. Because the latter are driving many countries into an even greater debt crisis.

In addition, another debate about climate financing has heated up in Baku. According to the definition of the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, many countries with high per capita emissions and per capita income still count as developing countries, such as rich petrol states or China. The EU in particular has therefore

called for a broadening of the donor base, which would also oblige such countries to contribute to climate financing.

As a result, the battle lines were hardened and COP29 threatened to collapse shortly before the end. It was only when the negotiations went into extra time on Saturday that the industrialised countries increased their offer to 300 billion per year. Although this represents a tripling of the previous sum, it only covers a quarter of the estimated costs — and the sum is also to be made up of private funds. Whilst the 1.3 trillion target is also mentioned as a target figure, there is no concrete commitment. There is also a reference to the fact that this higher sum is to be mobilised by both industrialised countries and other countries.

For the developing countries, it was therefore 'take it or leave it' at the last minute. Meanwhile, the industrialised countries emphasised that the chances of a deal next year were even worse. In an open letter, civil society actors from the Climate Action Network called on the countries from the Global South to leave the negotiations without a deal.

After more than 30 hours of extra time, the negotiations were finally concluded in the early hours of Sunday morning. However, many countries in the Global South are bitterly disappointed with the outcome. While the summit saved multilateralism at the last minute, it did so at the expense of the developing countries, which must now continue to cope without sufficient support in the fight against the climate crisis. Further trust between the Global North and South, which is urgently needed in these difficult geopolitical times, has been lost.

Which other aspects of climate protection were neglected at this COP?

The climate summit in Baku was rightly dominated by the question of how much money will be available for climate financing in the future. This is an important basic prerequisite for global climate justice. At least as important, however, is the question of how the climate crisis can be combated in a socially just manner through appropriate qualitative elements. There were also official negotiations on this, but they were overshadowed by the discussions on the global climate financing target.

There were setbacks in the negotiations on gender at the beginning. This was because some, particularly Arab states, rejected that LGBTIQ rights should also be mentioned. In the end, however, the negotiations came to a successful conclusion, which is decidedly human rights-based — a really all too small glimmer of hope at this

climate conference.

Last year in Dubai, through the Just Transition Work Programme, the socially just design of the transition was officially included in climate policy negotiations for the first time. As just transition must always be considered in a local context, it was admittedly difficult to reach an agreement here. There were also different ideas on how different stakeholder groups should be involved in the process. Nonetheless, there were good suggestions that provided starting points for further implementation. However, the Just Transition Work Programme was used by some countries as a bargaining chip to push through their own demands on other issues. Saudi Arabia, in particular, played an extremely negative role here. These negotiations were therefore postponed until next year.

Civil society and the trade unions, who campaigned tirelessly for a just transition and climate justice at the climate conference, will continue to ensure that these issues are not ignored. This gives us hope despite the extremely disappointing results from Baku. We can only hope that the COP30 presidency in Brazil will see it the same way and place these demands at the centre of the next negotiations.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



Yvonne Blos
Berlin

Yvonne Blos is an international climate policy officer at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Previously, she headed the Foundation's regional climate project in Asia, based in Vietnam, and was responsible for monitoring and evaluating the FES's international work.