

Fair COP, Good COP, Bad COP

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It warms the heart while penning a final editorial for 2023 to ponder glad tidings from COP28 as the trumpeting echoes into the distance from a multitude of announcements. All the while, one is left contemplating the good intentions of the infra community that travelled thousands of miles to show face.

Scrolling through LinkedIn during COP28, yet another person you recognise – friends, contacts and “industry names” – and you marvel at air miles clocked for a cheesy iPhone grin, followed inevitably by “super excited” (will people please leave that to teenagers) posts extolling the virtues of all who attended to... “make a difference”. Halting global warming in its tracks with a 2-week, sustained blast of hot air.

One source this week said: “I avoid LinkedIn during COP as the Instagram hypocrisy is vomit-worthy.”

But for the masses, virtue overload has been achieved.

Bravo COP28. The world is more virtuous today than it was after COP27, significantly moreso than COP26, meanwhile COP25’s starting to look like a village fete... and so on.

This year – Dubai in December – proved popular with every Tom, Dick and Harry able to get signoff to attend the annual climate summit. Wood-frame sunglasses packed. Ethically-sourced summer suits neatly folded. Sun block applied. Puritanical/pioneering pose perfected.

It rather leaves one wondering whether the same folk will break their necks to attend COP29 next November... in Azerbaijan... when delegates can expect temperatures ranging from 10-13C (50-56F).

But surely, that isn’t a deciding factor? Surely it isn’t.

It’s a fair COP

When you look back over the summit in Dubai, the general impression is that it prompted masses of announcements on going big into renewable energy... and then going home... thousands of miles away... by plane.

From the launch of [Levidian’s LOOP20 system](#) for ADNOC to field-test carbon capture technology; through to Cambodia pledging to [stop greenfield coal-fired](#) in favour of gas (small steps); to the ADB announcing launch of its [Climate Action Catalyst Fund](#) from the start of 2024.

So many announcements... so many stories they’ve been keeping a lid on for the big reveal.



That's the journalistic view... if slightly unkind. The timely release of information to a media sector focused squarely on the global summit, hungry for news to justify having hacks on the ground.

Let's not forget – in the spirit of carbon footprint reduction – those announcements could have been emailed as press releases (which they also did), negating the need for the massed media to attend.

But it wouldn't be a jamboree without political leaders and swarms of hacks, all of whom insist it wouldn't be worth hosting it... had they not been there in person.

Good COP

But let's be fair. There was a lot of interesting news to come out of COP28.

AMEA Power had a lot to say on its plans to drive agendas across Africa. Hyphen announced fresh funding for its Namibian hydrogen ambitions (though what they're going to do with it, heaven knows). Keppel and Masdar joined forces for renewables across Asia and the Middle East.

Meridiam and EDF signed the 25-year concession agreement with Togo to DBFO a 64MW solar PV plant... which just had to be done in person at COP. Masdar and Iberdrola launched a €15 billion partnership to develop offshore wind and green hydrogen in Germany, the UK and the US.

North Macedonia announced its Just Energy Transition investment platform to transform the coal-dependent country alongside a 1.7GW renewables pipeline. Indonesia is going to retire its 600MW coal-fired power plant 7 years earlier than scheduled with support from the ADB.

So many announcements of plans (many more than the above) that enjoyed a timely release to a receptive audience.

And yes, it was a "good news" fortnight. Lots of column inches written. Lots of links clicked. Lots of reasons to have travelled all that way, be gouged for a hotel room and – maybe – catch some rays on the sidelines, or just bask in the glory.

Bad COP

It's not all sunshine and roses (panels and turbines) when it comes to market perception of COP28 from among those who actually deliver on these promises.

Aside from UN climate chief Simon Stiell saying "genuine strides forward" were made at COP28, if we are going to judge the event on rhetoric, then ending with a vague line on the "transition away" from fossil fuels is a winner.

Chatting with folk around the industry – some of whom went to Dubia, some involved in financing/delivering infra/energy in the Middle East, and others who never considered going there in the first place – their perception is far from sunny/rosy.

For those who are based in the Middle East, there is a sense that COP28 coalesced a direction of travel for renewable energy and gave focus to the impressive Alterra announcement that the UAE will contribute \$30 billion to a new climate-oriented fund with BlackRock, Brookfield and TPG. Alterra aims to support \$250 billion in investments by 2030, improving access to financing across Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania.

Hydrogen featured big at COP... enough to convince a sceptic that it's an established feedstock for base load energy generation and everyone's comfortable with the economics of shipping and the technicalities of piping the stuff.

For some, the view that COP has become a "Davos of sorts for sustainability" was a compliment. For others it was an insult. One infra veteran said: "It's increasingly being viewed as a corporate networking event... MIPM without the yachts."

Had the phone calls made on COP28 been viewed as a straw poll, there would be one outlier saying that the “most relevant business decision makers were present” while the majority were of the opposite opinion.

As one puts it: “Not really the deal makers attending yet, so companies still sending their tree huggers. But likely that will change as the ever-increasing corporate flavour evolves and they will likely attract more deal makers in subsequent COPs.”

One of the most blunt observations was: “If we are to rely on that annual stramash for saving us, then it's time to find another ark.”

Another industry pal of many years standing says: “It’s becoming a parody. How many LinkedIn posts from people in infra who are not exactly at the front of the politics of climate change, treating it like it’s the Berlin infra conference.

“People were emailing me to catch up for coffee as if there was nowhere else to be seen. In the meantime, they cannot make progress with the oil nation states. Everyone though feels good about talking about energy transition... and it’s nice to get some sun in December. Let’s see how popular Azerbaijan is!”

One popular (possibly the wrong word) thing the UAE did with COP this year was to set up pavilions for countries that wanted one “so of course everyone did and the public sector came in their thousands”, according to one source who added that Nigeria had 1,400 delegates (unconfirmed).

“Everyone wanted their 2 minutes in the lights in front of any old camera,” says one infra type who was fresh back from Dubai. “I sat in numerous panels and badly designed meeting rooms where adjacent events kept trying to out-compete on decibels. Meanwhile, the piano men performed just to themselves... I think there's a song that runs like that. And yet, hardly an original idea – let alone coherence to paradigm shifting narratives. Oh lord no.”

The Blue Zone according to one source is where all the “policy (expletive deleted) happens” and is “actually just a few hundred and then another few hundred as observers, where all the politicking happens”.

This continues: “Now the Green Zone was where it was at. A true trade fair that kept the converts from drying out while they wheeled and dealed, dodging the unwashed and the pesky. And so they came in their hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands, each to sing their own songs.”

Another source points out that the \$700 million loss and damage fund that was agreed on the first day of the summit paled into insignificance when held against the US’s “multibillion dollar pledges that were conditional on Biden being re-elected and controlling congress”. The source adds: “Now that must reassure those good folks living in the Maldives.”

Criticism and plaudits aside, and the politicking ignored, the message is being driven home that the pace of investment into alternative energy needs to tick up dramatically.

Whether or not it will save the planet remains to be seen... but what will be seen is an evolution of traditional “project finance solutions” that are already in the process of transforming into a more flexible structure to respond to market requirements.

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