

Gulf States' Climate Actions Under Scrutiny: Navigating the Path to Genuine Environmental Commitment

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As the world grapples with the escalating impacts of climate change, the role of the Gulf states in global climate advocacy cannot be overstated. While nations like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have announced ambitious targets and significant investments, recent actions at COP29 in Baku, which achieved a historic breakthrough with the \$1.3 trillion “Baku Finance Goal” after tough and intense negotiations, and the fifth meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment (Plastic Pollution INC-5), held in Busan, Republic of Korea, have drawn global attention. These events highlighted their participation in international climate diplomacy but also raised important questions about their sincerity and strategy in addressing the climate crisis.

Balancing Commitments with Actions

Saudi Arabia, under the banner of the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), has established a comprehensive roadmap toward achieving net-zero emissions. As of late 2024, the Kingdom has launched more than 85 initiatives, representing a monumental investment of over US\$188 billion (SAR 705 billion), to deliver on its SGI targets. These initiatives span a wide spectrum of efforts, from large-scale reforestation projects to the deployment of cutting-edge carbon capture and storage technologies, as well as renewable energy

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development. These efforts aim to position Saudi Arabia as a leader in climate innovation while gradually transitioning its hydrocarbon-dependent economy toward a more sustainable model.

Likewise, the UAE has demonstrated its commitment to climate leadership by announcing an investment of up to AED 200 billion (USD 54.5 billion) to significantly enhance clean energy capacity and production over the next several years. This ambitious pledge aligns with the nation's 2050 climate goals, underscoring its determination to diversify its energy portfolio and reduce its carbon footprint. According to Suhail Al Mazrouei, UAE Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, this investment will accelerate the nation's journey toward sustainability by driving the adoption of renewable energy technologies and advancing energy efficiency initiatives.

Qatar has also entered the fold of climate leadership through a groundbreaking partnership with the United Kingdom on climate technologies. During the recent state visit of Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, to London, it was announced that Doha will invest £1 billion (USD 1.27 billion) in start-ups focused on green technology. This collaborative venture, as revealed by 10 Downing Street, reflects Qatar's strategic focus on fostering innovation and technological solutions to combat climate change. Such partnerships underscore the critical role of international cooperation in addressing the multifaceted challenges of the climate crisis.

During the plenary sessions at COP29 in Baku, where I served as the Special Envoy of Vanuatu, I had the honor of meeting Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Energy. Our discussion during this pivotal gathering highlighted Saudi Arabia's dedication to advancing renewable energy and addressing global climate challenges. Notably, the minister

demonstrated an impressive willingness to engage with counterparts from Small Island Developing States (SIDS), more so than many other leaders in the room. His proactive approach underscored a genuine interest in understanding and supporting the unique challenges faced by climate-vulnerable nations, reflecting a clear acknowledgment of the shared responsibility to address climate vulnerabilities globally.

Inclusivity, Diplomacy, and the Role of the Gulf States

To bridge this gap, Gulf states must prioritize transparency and inclusivity in their climate strategies. A genuine commitment to global climate goals involves not only setting ambitious targets but also ensuring their implementation aligns with sustainable development principles. Engaging with international stakeholders, including climate-vulnerable nations such as SIDS, is critical in fostering trust and collaboration.

For productive and sustained diplomacy, it is essential to acknowledge the Gulf states' unique challenges in transitioning to a green economy. The majority of their GDPs remain intricately tied to fossil fuel revenues, and the process of restructuring their economies to align with climate goals is complex, requiring significant time, investment, and adaptation. To achieve meaningful progress, we must engage with these nations constructively, supporting their gradual transformation rather than vilifying them.

Moreover, we must not overlook the fact that the United States remains the largest producer of fossil fuels globally. Focusing criticism disproportionately on the Gulf states risks creating a narrative that isolates them, while ignoring the broader global dynamics of energy production and consumption. Climate advocacy must adopt a balanced approach, addressing the responsibilities of

all major producers and fostering a sense of shared accountability in the fight against climate change.

Leveraging Gulf Resources for a Just Transition

The financial capacity of the Gulf states represents a unique opportunity to support global climate initiatives. Their substantial “coffers” position them to provide critical funding for the most vulnerable communities, particularly those in the Global South who bear the brunt of climate impacts. By channeling resources into climate adaptation and mitigation projects, the Gulf states can play a pivotal role in fostering resilience and promoting sustainable development across the globe.

“Saudi Arabia’s financial resources and technological advancements alone can be transformative for the SIDS, who lack access to vital resources for immediate and effective climate adaptation,” says Dr. Rebecca Nadin at ODI Global, a world-renowned policy think tank. This underscores the Gulf states’ potential to act as a lifeline for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), which face existential threats from rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and limited capacity for climate resilience.

With investments exceeding US\$188 billion under the SGI, USD 54.5 billion from the UAE, and USD 1.27 billion from Qatar’s partnership with the UK, the Gulf states have the potential to redefine their role in global climate governance. These nations can lead by example, demonstrating that economic prosperity and environmental stewardship are not mutually exclusive but are, in fact, interdependent.

To maximize the impact of these investments, however, Gulf states must ensure consistency between their public commitments and tangible actions.

This includes greater transparency in reporting emissions, phasing out subsidies for fossil fuels, and addressing the legitimate concerns of activists advocating for climate justice. By doing so, the Gulf states can fully leverage their resources to support the global transition to sustainability while establishing themselves as pivotal leaders in the climate movement.

The Path Forward

The Gulf states stand at a crossroads. Their significant economic resources, strategic geographic location, and growing investments in sustainability position them as potential leaders in the global transition toward a greener future. Yet, leadership requires more than financial commitments—it demands authenticity, transparency, and a clear alignment of policy and practice.

The breakthrough achieved at COP29 in Baku, with the \$1.3 trillion “Baku Finance Goal” following tough and intense negotiations, demonstrates the transformative power of collective action when nations align their efforts toward sustainability. As climate advocates and members of the international community, we must engage Gulf states constructively, recognizing their challenges while encouraging them to take bold, transformative steps. By fostering partnerships, leveraging their financial resources for global climate justice, and building an inclusive climate movement, we can ensure that the Gulf states emerge as true champions of sustainability. Let us move forward with fairness and inclusivity, acknowledging that the fight against climate change requires not only urgency but also collaboration, understanding, and unity.