

COP28 climate summit shows we must stand up to Big Oil

OPINION

By David Suzuki

Like the tobacco industry before it, the fossil fuel industry is doing all it can to survive ? and to keep raking in excessive profits ? in the face of irrefutable evidence of its harms. Nowhere was that clearer than at the COP28 climate summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Hosted by a major oil-producing nation and headed by that country's top oil executive, and attended by an army of lobbyists, representatives and supporters of the oil and gas industries, it often seemed more like a conference to throw industry a lifeline than to come to grips with the most serious threat humanity has ever faced. The Alberta and Saskatchewan governments even sent delegations, acting more as representatives of the oil and gas industry than of their citizens' best interests.

But we can't let the oversized presence of the industry responsible for the crisis overshadow the efforts of governments from around the world to reduce emissions.

Before the conference, COP28 president and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company head Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber claimed that there is ?no science? showing that phasing out fossil fuels will achieve the goal of keeping global warming below 1.5 C. He also repeated the false argument that phasing out gas, oil and coal would ?take the world back into caves.?

United Nations secretary general António Guterres was more realistic: ?The science is clear: The 1.5 C limit is only possible if we ultimately stop burning all fossil fuels. Not reduce, not abate. Phase out, with a clear timeframe.?The myth that transitioning from deadly fossil fuels to cleaner energy will cause economic harm doesn't hold up even in the current economic paradigm. Research shows it could create more jobs and economic opportunities.

A Deloitte study for the World Economic Forum found that ?the global economy could gain US\$43 trillion over the next five decades by rapidly accelerating the transition to net-zero,? and that failing to do so ?could cost the global economy US\$178 trillion.?A report by the Business & Sustainable Development Commission found sustainable development measures could generate up to 380 million jobs by 2030, mostly in developing countries.

The costs of climate disruption are already rising, from extreme weather-related infrastructure and agriculture damage to pollution-related health care costs and migrant crises. Markets for gas, oil and coal are also volatile, and subject to industry profiteering from global conflict, which creates a ?fossilflation? affordability crisis. At the same time, costs for renewable energy continue to drop, with wind and solar now cheaper than gas, oil or coal, even with storage, as well as being far less damaging.

While COP28 should be about the severity of the threat of climate change and how best to address it, some delegates questioned whether it's even a threat. Instead of being informed by what science tells us about the state of the planet and the dangers created by our actions, we give economic and political considerations equal, if not greater, priority. The extent of our willingness to act to meet the crisis is not determined by the magnitude of the threat but by what is possible within the constraints of the economy and politics, which are driven by deadlines set in amped-up human time.

Despite industry hijacking of the climate narrative, we can't dismiss the progress made at COP28. On the first day of the conference, November 30, countries agreed to set up a loss and damage fund to help vulnerable countries respond to climate change impacts. A couple of days later, 118 countries pledged to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030. Later, Canada joined other countries, including the U.S., in announcing regulations to cut methane emissions from the oil and gas sector, with Canada pledging to reduce industry's emissions of the potent greenhouse gas by at least 75 per cent below 2012 levels by 2030. These and other agreed-upon measures have justifiably been criticized for not being enough to confront rapidly rising emissions and global temperatures, but

they're a start. Again, fossil fuel supporters, including the Alberta and Saskatchewan governments, have pushed back, but we must all speak louder in calling for stronger, not weaker, global action. For the sake of humanity, we have to get this right. We must heed the evidence. We're running out of time. David Suzuki is a scientist, broadcaster, author and co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation. Written with David Suzuki Foundation Senior Writer and Editor Ian Hanington. Learn more at davidsuzuki.org.