



COP29

## No one has any intention of cancelling the climate conference

Why not? Climate summits have become mega-events without mega-results. Critics want to make them smaller and more efficient. One idea: back to Bonn!

By [Viola Kiel](#), Baku

18 November 2024, 14:23



**Viola Kiel**

The editor of ZEIT ONLINE's Knowledge section is following the COP29 negotiations from Azerbaijan's capital Baku.



Azerbaijan is hosting COP29, which some find absurd considering that 90 per cent of its export revenues come from the sale of oil and gas. © Alexander Nemenov/AFP/Getty Images

Things are crumbling in [Baku](#). Not from the facades - the city shines and gleams, polished, swept clean and brightly lit, even the stray cats look well-groomed. What is crumbling is the conviction that the

The World Climate Conference, which has been running here for a week now, will be able to deliver what it was once set up to [do: get](#) the world's greenhouse gas emissions [under control](#)

The first symbolic cracks had appeared even before more than 60,000 people flew to Baku, where you can see drilling rigs from the aeroplane window, and checked into hotels that charge ten times the usual price for an overnight stay. Even before Azerbaijani ruler Ilham Aliyev praised his country's oil and gas reserves as a "[gift from God](#)". And before [Azerbaijan's](#) deputy energy minister [was filmed](#) promoting deals for new oil and gas business during the conference.

They show themselves in the state of the literal global climate: the earth is too hot, global [climate damage is growing by the trillions](#) and [emissions](#) are still rising. Despite 28 rounds of [UN climate conferences](#). Despite a *transition away from* fossil fuels, which was [agreed](#) by the states [in Dubai in 2023](#). "The COPs are clearly not achieving their goals," said German climate researcher [Mojib Latif](#). He is not alone in this opinion.

### **The fourth-largest delegation: the fossil fuel lobby**

"It is now clear that the COP is no longer fit for purpose," it says [in an open letter](#). With their current structure, the climate conferences are not succeeding in bringing about the necessary, rapid change. "This is the reason for our call for a fundamental overhaul of the COP." The letter is signed by Ban Ki Moon, the former Secretary-General of the [United Nations](#), Christiana Figueres, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and Johan Rockström, the internationally renowned climate researcher and Director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, among others.

The letter quickly made the rounds in Baku. Many of those who commented on it at the conference went on the defensive, all pointing to the [expansion of renewables](#), the green revolution that is progressing steadily. And yes: the basis for this was fought for at the climate conferences. Investment in renewable energies is now [twice as high](#) as investment in fossil fuels. However, the end of gas, oil and coal is still a long way off, and the peak in emissions [that many were hoping for this year](#) is nowhere in sight.

Will this COP, number 29, bring major progress? It won't be any easier, not least because of the cracks, or rather craters, caused by Donald Trump. It was already clear at the start of the negotiations that the delegation from the world's largest economy and largest oil producer would soon be out of a job. Trump will return to the White House and [pull](#) the USA [out of the Paris Climate Agreement](#). And it is possible that others will emulate him: for example, Argentinian President Javier Milei, who considers himself [Donald Trump's "favourite president"](#).

It is not made any easier by the fact that the host, Azerbaijan, has invited [at least 132 CEOs from oil and gas companies](#). In total, [more than 1,770 representatives of the fossil fuel industry](#) will be roaming the conference grounds these days - making the energy lobby, whose end is being discussed here, the fourth largest delegation. The COP threatens to become a fairground.

Is the climate conference still the right forum to tackle the climate crisis? In the end, the number of countries that really make a difference to global greenhouse gas emissions is manageable: the [G20 countries](#), for example, are responsible for 84 per cent of global emissions and represent 79 per cent of the world's population. Has the COP principle, in which 197 countries have to agree on a solution, on a final paper, perhaps simply outlived its usefulness?

### **Too much minutiae, too many people having their say**

Johan Rockström, one of the authors of the open letter, did not travel to Baku. However, he does not want this to be interpreted as a signal. He feels misunderstood, he says on the phone: "I have already heard that some people have read this letter as if we were proposing to abolish the COP. But the exact opposite is the case: we want a stronger COP. The climate conference is more important than ever." But it should no longer be the way it is.

Rockström and the other signatories outline very briefly what they envisage for the future: smaller, more regular meetings, stronger support from current science and clearer criteria for what is discussed, how countries are held accountable, who organises the COP in the first place and who is allowed to participate. There is also a desire for more pragmatism. Rockström says: "We are currently making the perfect the enemy

of the good and are still discussing the details. But with the Paris Agreement, we have a good enough agreement. I even fear that this constant immersion in ever more detailed discussions is being used as an excuse not to tackle the real challenges."

He is also thinking about the influence of other summits or groups, says Rockström. "One thing is clear: [the biggest emitters, the richest nations, must lead the way.](#)"

### **Back to Bonn, where it all began?**

Benito Müller goes even further. He has been researching the UN negotiation process at the University of Oxford for decades. He is not in Baku either, and that is perhaps a bit of a signal. He is disappointed and overtired by the mega-events that the world climate conferences have become, he says in the video interview, smiling cheerfully into the camera. The COP should be about the negotiations

is the point. Not about a high-profile summit meeting of heads of state and government as in the past, where everyone takes photos and no one does any substantive work. And not about the climate trade fair, which is now also a completely normal part of the COP. "All of this is important. But together, at the same time and in the same place, it is counterproductive. In this form, the event discredits the UN process."

The COPs were not always major global events: in the early years, fewer than 5,000 people took part. However, since [COP26 in Glasgow](#), the number of visitors has not fallen below 35,000. Around 70,000 people came to Dubai last year. Müller says: "This growth means that fewer and fewer countries are even being considered as hosts. Because the costs are so high, as are the demands on the local infrastructure. Countries that are particularly affected by the consequences of climate change would not have the slightest chance of hosting the COP and clearly demonstrating their plight to the world. Samoa, for example, says the expert: a Pacific island state threatened by rising sea levels. And whose GDP is just half the size of the economic output of [Delmenhorst](#) in Lower Saxony. Only the industrialised nations - or oil countries like Azerbaijan - could take on the role of host.

Above all, however, the mega-event character of the conference means that public expectations are bound to be disappointed. "Only a new treaty like the Paris Agreement could fulfil these exaggerated expectations. But there will be no new treaty, it's now about bookkeeping, about administration. That's not cool or glamorous, but it has to be done," says Müller. What the United Nations is doing is necessary, but not sufficient. "It was never intended that they could deliver everything, they should merely guide and support."

### **No replacement for those who are already being ignored**

In the meantime, many people are unloading their anger about the CO<sub>2</sub> content of the atmosphere, the storms, floods, fires and disasters in the world onto the UN. The wrong place, says Müller. "Implementation lies with the states. The frustration should be directed at them. It's your own government at home that needs to be taken to court."

[In 2021, the researcher published a detailed reform concept](#). His proposal: smaller COPs, limited to 5,000 negotiators, with a temporal and spatial separation of the three parts negotiation, summit and trade fair. He already has a location in mind: Bonn. The [UN's rules and regulations](#) actually stipulate that the conferences should be held there.

where the UNFCCC - the institution of the Framework Convention on Climate Change - has its headquarters, even if another country holds the presidency. And this seat is the former capital of the Federal Republic of Germany. A meeting of the heads of state could still take place, he says, but somewhere else, for example in Berlin, and the climate trade fair in Frankfurt or Hanover. Or in Baku, but excluding the all-important negotiations.

Müller also says that the conference should not be cancelled under any circumstances. This has to do with greenhouse gas emissions: At the COP, countries have to [present their plans for CO<sub>2</sub> reduction](#) time and again; they are at least forced to think about it. Above all, however, the climate conference is indispensable for everything else that the Paris Agreement provides for: when it comes to [adaptation](#), loss and damage.

For many of the particularly affected countries, the COP is the only chance to be heard. That's what Johan Rockström says, that's what NGOs and aid organisations say, that's what Benito Müller says. G20 or G7 summits are no substitute for such debates. "There, the *little guys* have no representation, no voice," says the scientist Müller. "The

Climate Conference is their only forum."

So nobody intends to abolish the climate conference. Some people just think it should be completely different. Perhaps there is actually an opportunity in the reorganisation. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing if the focus of attention shifted. The G20 is meeting in Rio de Janeiro this week. It is not forbidden for the participants to talk about the climate there too.