

The annual United Nations climate change conference is being held this year in Baku, Azerbaijan. Called COP29, delegates from nearly 200 nations are expected to negotiate a new target for financing efforts related to climate mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage. (COP29)



Doreen Ajiambo

View Author Profile



Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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Catholic officials and fellow people of faith will join global leaders and national delegates for the next two weeks in Baku, Azerbaijan, a country between Europe and Asia that is host to the latest United Nations climate change conference, COP29.

The major topic of discussion in Baku (Nov. 11-22) is expected to be finance, as nations negotiate a new monetary target to fund efforts to slash heat-trapping greenhouse gas emissions, and to adapt to present and future climate impacts and compensate for losses and damages countries and communities have already experienced.

On the minds of participants will be the fallout from the recent U.S. election of President-elect Donald Trump, who has sworn to ramp up fossil fuel production and again pull the world's largest user and producer of oil and gas — and largest historical source of emissions — from the Paris Agreement. He has also floated removing the the U.S. from the U.N. treaty underlying the Paris climate accord.

"We are compounding the intensity of natural disasters and condemning ourselves and people around the world to disastrous harm," the Laudato Si' Movement and Catholic Climate Covenant said of U.S. oil and gas production in a letter to fellow Catholics, President Joe Biden and U.S. climate envoy John Podesta.

While the letter did not address Trump's election, the Catholic groups urged the current president to swiftly submit a new national climate target (one that would eliminate oil and gas subsidies), which is due a month after Trump retakes office.

The absence of the U.S., the world's largest economy, from international climate talks and backsliding in its own climate mitigation work would put the Paris accord target of limiting average global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) at more peril. Exceeding that level, scientists say, will make climate impacts like droughts, extreme storms and heatwaves far more severe.

A U.N. report ahead of COP29 stated temperature rise is set to increase between 2.6 C and 3.1 C by the end of the century, resulting in "debilitating impacts to people, planet and economies."

While some scientists believe the 1.5 C goal is already lost, the report said it remains "technically possible" and requires countries to enhance, and enact, their climate action plans. If all current plans and pledges are implemented, warming would be limited to 1.9 C, the report said.

The 1.5 C trajectory, scientists say, needs emissions to be nearly halved by 2030 on the way to net-zero by 2050. Under current climate plans, emissions are set to decline just 2.6% by 2030, while current emissions concentrations are at their highest levels on record.

A recent U.N. survey of 77,000 people in 77 countries found 80% want stronger actions on climate change from their countries, and 72% endorsed a quick transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources.

"As we head to COP29 we carry with us both a sense of urgency and of an expectation for climate justice," Lisa Sullivan, senior program officer for integral ecology at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, told EarthBeat.

Approximately 50,000 government officials, policymakers, investors and non-state actors are expected to descend upon Baku, the capital of petrostate Azerbaijan where the world's first oil well was drilled in 1848.



Azerbaijan is the host nation for the COP29 United Nations climate change conference. The country borders Russia to the north and Iran to the south. (COP29)

COP29 has been dubbed the "finance COP." Countries are expected to set a new climate funding goal for the first time in 15 years. Previously, nations pledged to provide $100 billion annually to developing nations by 2020. That target was reached two years late, and some analyses have questioned if the pledged money is new funds or reallocated resources.

As much as $500 billion to $1 trillion annually could be required to fully fund climate actions at scale, according to a review by the World Resources Institute. In addition to a total, negotiators will debate a timeline for delivering funds, how it's allocated, how it's measured and who will pay. Developed countries have argued China, the world's second-largest economy but still considered under the U.N. a developing nation, should contribute to the fund.

The Loss and Damage Fund, established in 2022 to assist vulnerable countries and communities already impacted by climate change, is a main focus for Catholic and faith groups. They insist that the loss and damage fund must be made quickly available to those it was set up to help — the countries most vulnerable to climate

change, including small island nations.

Historically, Africa has accounted for the smallest share of global carbon dioxide emissions, around 3%, yet faces some of the most severe challenges due to climate change. In contrast, the U.S. accounts for an estimated 20% of historical carbon emissions, followed by China at 11%.

So far, an estimated $700 million has been pledged to the fund. The amount needed for loss and damage is estimated at hundreds of billions annually by 2030.

“Now that it is an established entity our work cannot stop until the necessary financial contributions to the Fund are made,” Sullivan said.

Fletcher Harper, an Episcopal priest and executive director of GreenFaith, told EarthBeat the issue isn't whether wealthy countries can afford the cost. "Clearly they can," he said.

“Wealthy countries, very simply, must pay their existing commitments and they must increase their financial commitments,” he said.

Discussion also will address how funding is divided for actions related to mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage; the form financing takes; and how countries use controversial carbon markets, where emissions credits are traded between countries.

CIDSE, a network of mostly European-based Catholic development organizations, has called for financing to come as grants — not debt-creating loans — and for minimum floors to be established for mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage.

“Our greatest expectation is that a just climate finance commitment will be made by the world’s nations to enable this global transition from fossil fuels in a fast and fair way," Sullivan said.



A man walks past the place where his house once stood in El Bosque, Mexico, Nov. 7, 2022, amid rising sea levels that are destroying homes built on the shoreline and forcing villagers to relocate. (OSV News/Reuters/Gustavo Graf)

Like many Catholic relief organizations, the Maryknoll Missioners bear witness to the heavy impacts of climate change in their work in Africa, Asia and Latin America. With increasing frequency, Sullivan said, extreme weather events disrupt farming, annihilate livelihoods, interrupt food supply chains, and force communities to flee their homes, leading to severe starvation and suffering.

In a joint statement, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services stressed that the needs of poor people and countries must "be a priority at the center of deliberations on climate change," especially on finance. They too said loans should be avoided and called effective adaptation strategies "a matter of justice."

"Adaptation benefits developed and developing nations alike. Adaptation saves lives

and protects ecosystems," they said.

COP29 observers also will watch closely how nations follow up on last year's commitments at COP28 in Dubai to shift away from fossil fuels. It was the first time in COP's nearly three-decade history that countries made such a pledge to transition from the primary source of global warming.

CIDSE said it is imperative that countries in their updated national climate plans (called nationally determined contributions, or NDCs) due in February include a "clear plan" and timeline for phasing out fossil fuel consumption and production and shift to renewable energy systems.

"The upcoming NDCs offer the opportunity to reorganise structures and systems in such a way that the phase-out of fossil fuels and ramp-up of renewable energies does not happen on the backs of the most vulnerable," said Madeleine Wörner, renewable energies and energy policy expert for Misereor, the German bishops' development organization, in a press release.



Smoke and flames rise from Park Fire burning near Chico, Calif., July 25. A man has been charged with arson, accused of pushing a burning car into a ravine near the fire. (OSV News/Reuters/Fred Greaves)

Harper said it is imperative that world leaders reaffirm their commitment from COP28 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, to move away from fossil fuels. But more than words, they must show how they plan to deliver.

"Countries need to commit to action and not just verbiage," he told EarthBeat. "Last year, there was a lot made of the inclusion of a 'transition away from fossil fuels' in the official COP outcome. The year before, there was celebration about the creation of a Loss and Damage Fund. These victories, so far, have been hollow because they have not led to real change at the necessary speed or scale."

Harper called on the religious leaders gathered in Baku to take a stand and actively champion climate justice, emphasizing the urgent need to protect our planet from impending destruction.

“Religious groups must speak out much more firmly and consistently about this. We're in a death spiral that is accelerating and the COP process is part of the problem if it validates a failed response,” he said. “One good thing about COP is that it gives religious leaders an opportunity to study up on climate change and to preach with courage about this issue."

As a nation-state, the Holy See is set to take part in the world leaders summit that begins Nov. 12. Cardinal Pietro Parolin is scheduled to deliver a speech on Pope Francis' behalf on Nov. 13.



Pope Francis greets California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Jennifer Siebel Newsom during an audience in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican May 16 with participants in a conference on climate resilience sponsored by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Ahead of COP28 last year, Francis issued *Laudate Deum*, an apostolic exhortation "on the climate crisis," in which he warned "the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point."

As an official party to the Paris Agreement, the Vatican will have a delegation in Baku and take part in official negotiations. The newly formed Network of Catholic Climate and Environment Actors has been collaborating with the Holy See, including compiling a list of key messages they hope it conveys to other nations in the negotiating spaces.

David Munene, programs manager at the Catholic Youth Network on Environmental Sustainability in Africa has helped facilitate the network. He said he hopes that working with the Holy See they can "really influence negotiations at the COP29 to

cement the ethics and morality in the talks about climate change."

As in Dubai, a faith pavilion will be present in Baku.

Days before COP29 began, a global summit of 350 religious leaders and allies in Baku, backed the goals of the Paris Agreement, including the 1.5 C target, and urged COP29 attendees "to actively participate in public discussions on combatting climate change and rally global support to make the vision for a greener future reality." They also called for a permanent religious leaders advisory council within the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Harper told EarthBeat there's been an increase in religious engagement and preaching on climate change in the past decade. "But in too many faith communities, discussion about this issue skirts the centrality of large-scale political and financial action," because they feel ill-equipped or don't view it as important, he said.

Daughter of Wisdom Sr. Jean Quinn, executive director of UNANIMA International, said her organization would demand and expect that world leaders fulfill all the key agendas at COP29.

"We are witnesses to a world that is in a fragile state where there are poor, overlooked and especially neglected women, children and girls," Quinn said in a statement shared with EarthBeat. “As a group we want to see change. We want to raise our voices and demand that things must be different."

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