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Building Momentum at COP 29: New Frontiers in Climate Action and Green Finance

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The average global temperature continues to rise, with alarming acceleration in the rate of warming observed in recent years. The decade spanning from 2014 to 2023 has been recorded as the warmest in documented history, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive climate action.

Currently, the Conference of Parties (COP) 29 is being held in Baku, Azerbaijan. This annual gathering is crucial as it convenes representatives from governments and parties associated with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It serves as a platform for discussing and solidifying commitments aimed at achieving the primary climate objective: limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The signing of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 marked a pivotal moment in international climate policy, while the Paris Climate Change Treaty, adopted in 2015, is recognised as historic. This treaty brought together 197 countries, uniting them for the first time to deliberate on climate change challenges and collaboratively develop solutions.

While these discussions are critical, the transition from dialogue to concrete commitments poses significant challenges. Central to these discussions are essential questions regarding financial contributions: who will bear the costs, what will each party's contribution look like, and what financing mechanisms will be employed? Options include grants, loans, blended financing, or a combination of these approaches. Each COP is marked by its own set of expectations and achievements. For instance, COP 28 is noted for the establishment of the Loss and Damage Fund, which was designed to provide financial assistance for climate-related damages. Initially, this fund is being managed by the World Bank and is set to be hosted by the Philippines in a transition phase.

In addition, COP 29 will focus on the New Collective Quantified Goals (NCQG), which are essential for addressing the financing demands of climate change. The previous climate finance goal of mobilizing $100 billion annually from developed to developing countries between 2020 and 2025 has been largely seen as symbolic. This goal fell short in execution, as developed nations failed to fulfil the target until 2022, leading to accusations of double counting and manipulation of figures. The new NCQG aims to more accurately reflect the pressing needs and priorities of developing nations, with funding requirements now estimated to be in the trillions rather than the previously proposed billions.

To bridge this substantial financial gap, there is an urgent need to mobilize private sector investments and undertake broader reforms within the global financial system to make it more responsive to climate challenges. Additionally, critical issues such as the role of subsidies, the profits derived from fossil fuels, and the implementation of 'solidarity levies' must be addressed in these discussions.

From the perspective of developing countries, there is a growing consensus advocating for increased financing specifically directed toward climate adaptation, as these nations face particularly vulnerable social and economic conditions. A comprehensive, whole-society approach is essential to effectively address the multifaceted challenges posed by climate change, ensuring that all sectors of society are engaged in strategies to build resilience and adapt to an increasingly volatile climate.

According to the Fifth Biennial Assessment and Overview published by the UNFCCC Standing Committee on Finance, mitigation finance, which focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, constituted the largest share of climate-specific financial support, accounting for an impressive 57 percent through various channels, including bilateral and regional agreements, as well as other avenues. In comparison, adaptation finance, which aims to help communities adjust to the impacts of climate change, has demonstrated a significant upward trend. This funding increased from 20 percent, representing USD 6.4 billion, in the 2017–2018 period to 28 percent, or USD 8.9 billion, in 2019–2020. Despite this growth, it is important to note that adaptation finance is still far behind mitigation finance in terms of overall funding levels.

The implications of this financial disparity are particularly serious for vulnerable populations in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. These regions are facing increasing climate risks due to lower income levels, which limit their capacity to cope with climate-related disruptions, along with a glaring lack of access to essential infrastructure, such as safe drinking water, reliable energy, and transportation systems. These challenges make it imperative to channel more resources into adaptation efforts in these high-risk areas.

The current COP 29 is also anticipated to be notable for its emphasis on "Methane diplomacy." Methane, a greenhouse gas with significant short-term warming potential, accounts for nearly one-third of the warming observed since the Industrial Revolution. The agenda for COP 29 prioritizes a transition from pledges to actionable measures aimed at mitigating methane emissions across various industries, with a particular focus on fossil fuel extraction and the management of organic waste.

The conference is expected to introduce new initiatives designed to reduce methane emissions from sectors such as oil and gas, agriculture, and waste management. These initiatives will build upon the commitments established in the 2021 Global Methane Pledge. COP 29 aspires to promote the development of new policy frameworks that incorporate methane reduction objectives directly into national climate strategies, particularly in the context of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). Presently, many nations' climate commitments do not sufficiently address the issue of methane emissions.

As COP 29 convenes in Baku, Azerbaijan, the event will feature a vibrant green zone filled with participants from around the globe. These individuals will share their insights and experiences regarding climate change, highlighting the urgent need for effective solutions. However, the real decision-making occurs in the blue zone, where government representatives gather to negotiate, reach agreements, and occasionally express disagreements on key climate issues.

This raises essential questions about the role and responsibilities of small and medium-sized organisations, as well as individuals engaged in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. How can these contributors enhance their influence in such high-stakes negotiations? Some potential interventions are as follows.

Adopting Sustainable Lifestyle Practices

- Opting for reusable items, such as bags, bottles, and containers, as well as recycling responsibly, can significantly reduce contributions to landfills and decrease pollution.
- Using energy-efficient appliances, reducing water usage, and unplugging devices when they are not in use can help lower carbon footprints.

- Utilising public transportation, cycling, carpooling, or choosing electric or hybrid vehicles can reduce emissions.

Green Finance and Investment Choices

- Consider investing in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) funds or green bonds, which support companies or projects that prioritize sustainability and ethical practices.
- Select banks that invest in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, or low-carbon projects to support eco-friendly initiatives through everyday banking.

Promoting and Supporting Biodiversity

- Planting native species, avoiding chemical pesticides, and creating green spaces contribute positively to local biodiversity. Native plants, in particular, attract pollinators and support local wildlife.
- Encourage local governments to create and maintain parks, community gardens, and rooftop green spaces to help cities reduce pollution and provide habitats for wildlife.

Advocacy and Awareness

- Engaging in local environmental efforts, such as community cleanups, tree-planting drives, or educational campaigns, amplifies the impact and inspires others to get involved.
- Supporting policies and leaders who prioritize climate action, sustainable development, and environmental protection can create a significant impact. Individuals can join advocacy groups or participate in initiatives that promote systemic change.

By amplifying their voices and strategies, these smaller entities can play a pivotal role in shaping climate action outcomes at such significant gatherings.