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Decoding the Global Goal on Adaptation at COP28

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Executive Summary

The agreement on a framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA) was one of the most important outcomes of the twenty-eighth UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai. Although adaptation has historically received less attention than mitigation, finance, and more recently loss and damage, it remains a key aspect of climate action as we near the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C threshold.

In the lead-up to COP28, eight workshops were held for negotiators, parties, experts, and stakeholders from NGOs to clarify what success would look like for the GGA and how to measure it. Because of this extensive engagement prior to COP28, negotiators had a strong conception of the key issues. While disagreements due to larger political issues caused stagnation during the first week of COP28, parties and subgroups made progress on the sidelines of the formal negotiations. Eventually, the COP presidency took the issue up to the ministerial level, where major issues such as means of implementation were worked out behind closed doors.

The final decision text contains language on long-term transformational adaptation, which was seen as a success by many developing countries. It also sets targets for a finalized list of thematic areas—a contentious subject and another success for many developing countries. These targets explain what success looks like, ultimately aiming for the high-level objective of well-being for people and planet while leaving the details of achieving this objective to countries. The text also includes targets for the iterative adaptation cycle. In addition, there were a number of paragraphs on means of implementation, though many developing countries saw these as a failure, as they provide little new or significant language.

The next step will be to develop indicators for the targets in the GGA framework. Ideally, the negotiators should set the strategic direction of this process while leaving the selection of indicators to experts. It will be important to keep the list of indicators short, account for data gaps, and draw on existing indicators to the extent possible. While there is much work to be done to give life to the GGA framework adopted at COP28, it has the potential to be the new guiding light for climate action.

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Introduction

Press coverage of the outcome of the twenty-eighth UN Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai focused largely on the outcome of the first Global Stocktake, which called for a “phasedown of unabated coal power.” Many media outlets, in addition to Sultan al-Jaber, the president of COP28, praised this outcome for signaling a historic transition away from fossil fuels.¹ However, as “historic” as this outcome was (and a close reading of that language reveals that it was far less historic than Sultan al-Jaber would have the public believe), COP28 achieved equally if not more historic outcomes on other issues, such as the Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA).

Although adaptation has historically received less attention than mitigation, finance, and now loss and damage, the GGA has the potential to be the new guiding light for climate action. We are set to hurdle past the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C threshold well within the next decade. Mitigation will always be important, and loss and damage will certainly increase as temperatures rise, but we can always work to adapt to whatever climate change scenario we find ourselves in to protect the well-being of people and planet. This issue brief will focus on the significance of the GGA decision at COP28.²

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What Happened at COP28 on the GGA?

COP28 marked the end of the two-year Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work program (GlaSS) on the GGA (see Box 1). Negotiators from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), parties, experts, and key stakeholders from NGOs all over the world had met eight times from 2022–2023 to clarify what success would look

like for the GGA and how to measure it. At COP27, after the first year of the work program, parties decided to develop a framework for the GGA to “guide the achievement of the global goal on adaptation and the review of overall progress in achieving it.”³ However, while the framework was initiated at COP27 with a few elements specified, it left much up for debate before the final framework would be adopted at COP28. Fleshing out this framework further then became the focus of the four workshops in 2023, which took place in the Maldives, Germany, Argentina, and Botswana.

Despite the efforts of both organizers and participants, many felt that the workshop in Argentina—the seventh out of eight—was the first that was truly a collaborative, productive discussion. Participants were able to leave their negotiating hats behind and engage constructively on the substance of the framework, unlike at earlier workshops, which felt like negotiations. This collaborative spirit continued in Botswana, including in a closed-door, parties-only session after the formal workshop in which negotiators were able to dig into the details of the framework (the formal workshops had also been open to non-parties). Negotiators also met consistently on the sidelines of these workshops, virtually in bilateral meetings and subgroup discussions, and even in larger in-person sessions to build as much consensus as possible on this framework before COP28.

Because of this extensive engagement prior to COP28, negotiators had a strong conception of the key issues. Many parties, particularly developing countries, were keen to set targets for the framework around both the steps of the iterative adaptation cycle and the different thematic areas that had been discussed in Sharm el-Sheikh (see Figure 1). Questions remained, however, as to whether these targets would be high-level or more detailed and

1 Valerie Volcovici, Gloria Dickie, and William James, “Nations Strike Deal at COP28 to Transition Away from Fossil Fuels,” *Reuters*, December 13, 2023; William James and Elizabeth Piper, “COP28 President Hails Climate Deal as ‘Historic,’” *Reuters*, December 13, 2023.

2 IPI worked closely with and supported the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) in the COP28 GGA negotiations. This issue brief is based on insights gained from that involvement, spanning from conversations with negotiators and stakeholders to full engagement in negotiations.

3 UNFCCC, *Report of the Conference of the Parties Serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement on Its Fourth Session, Held in Sharm el-Sheikh from 6 to 20 November 2022*, UN Doc. FCCC/PA/CMA/2022/10/Add.1, March 17, 2023, Decision 3/CMA.4, para. 9.

Box 1. Key definitions

Global Goal on Adaptation (GGA): The Paris Agreement (2015) established the Global Goal on Adaptation with the aim of “enhancing adaptive capacity, strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability to climate change, with a view to contributing to sustainable development and ensuring an adequate adaptation response.”⁴

Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh Work Programme (GlaSS): This work program was created at COP26 in Glasgow (2021) to give more clarity to the GGA.

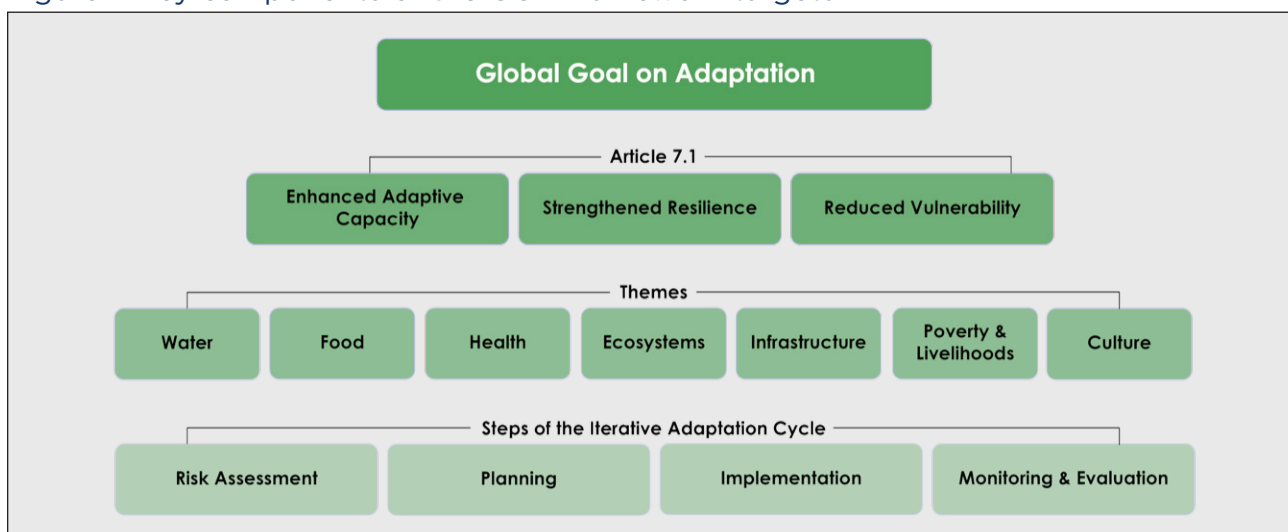
whether they would be on the steps of the iterative adaptation cycle, the thematic areas, or both. Developing countries had also made it clear that a framework without specific provision for means of implementation, including climate finance, would be unacceptable and incomplete. This was sure to be a point of contention in Dubai.

With all this in mind, negotiators arrived in Dubai throughout the week prior to COP28 ready to adopt an ambitious framework on the GGA. The days prior to the formal beginning of COP28, as well as the first few days of COP itself, were spent in bilateral meetings, informal subgroup discussions, and formal group coordinations (scheduled sessions where groups hash out their final positions). The UNFCCC process contains many negotiating groups, the largest of which is the G77 and China, made up of 134 developing countries. Within this group are many subgroups, including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the

Least Developed Countries (LDCs), the Arab Group, the African Group of Negotiators (AGN), the Like-Minded Developing Countries (LMDCs), Argentina–Brazil–Uruguay (ABU), and the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC). There is significant overlap between these groups, as well as a few developing country parties that do not belong to any subgroup. That is to say, there are many different voices and interests at play within the G77 and China. Additionally, there are the developed country parties and subgroups, which have their own set of coordinations. It is a challenge to find time to coordinate with all these subgroups, let alone reach a group consensus.

Although there was much hard work and goodwill built among GGA negotiators from the in-person meetings in the lead-up to Dubai, COP presents its own set of political challenges. Adaptation often feels like the forgotten child compared to the more

Figure 1. Key components of the GGA framework targets



⁴ United Nations, “Paris Agreement,” 2015, Article 7, para. 1.

heavily publicized topics of mitigation, finance, and now loss and damage. This neglect has been partially due to a lack of clear targets, as well as a general lack of understanding of what adaptation means. Furthermore, it can often feel as though disagreements in the adaptation negotiating rooms are about something else entirely. For example, if one group has a strong position on mitigation that is being blocked in the mitigation negotiating rooms, it can stall adaptation negotiations until it gets what it wants on mitigation.

This was certainly the case at the GGA negotiations in Dubai. The first week of negotiations was stagnant, although parties and subgroups continued to make progress on the sidelines of the formal negotiations. After the technical co-facilitators produced two iterations of text that certain parties refused to engage on (likely due to larger political issues), the COP presidency took the issue up to the ministerial level, where the major issues, particularly means of implementation, were worked out behind closed doors. Finally, after several rounds of consultations among ministers and opportunities for input from technical negotiators, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Framework for Global Climate Resilience was adopted in the closing plenary of COP28 on December 13, 2023.

The framework is not just a tool for reporting or for the Global Stocktake; it is meant to guide adaptation action and enhance support.

reducing the increasing adverse impacts, risks and vulnerabilities associated with climate change, as well as to enhance adaptation action and support.”⁶ This language was decided at COP27 and provides a useful baseline for understanding the framework’s purpose. It is not just a tool for reporting or for the Global Stocktake; it is meant to guide adaptation action and enhance support. The phrase “reducing the increasing adverse impacts” also creates a link to loss and damage, as enhanced adaptation should reduce loss and damage incurred from climate change.

The purpose of the framework is bolstered by the high-level objectives laid out in Paragraph 8, which includes a few crucial ideas. First, it mentions “long-term transformational and incremental adaptation,” which refers to adaptation solutions that deal with the root causes of issues. This was seen as a success by several subgroups, particularly AOSIS, whose members want to increase understanding and implementation of transformational adaptation. However, there was some tension around including transformational adaptation, as some parties associated it with mitigation and some argued that the concept is too poorly defined. Paragraph 46 requests the Secretariat to conduct further work on defining transformational adaptation, which will hopefully ease some of this tension (see below).

Next, Paragraph 8 specifies that the framework should aim to enhance “the collective well-being of all people, the protection of livelihoods and economies, and the preservation and regeneration of nature, for current and future generations.” This clause gives more meaning to Article 7 by specifying what a world with “enhanced adaptive capacity, strengthened resilience, and reduced vulnerability” actually looks like: well-being for people and planet.⁷ The targets set in Paragraph 9 give this concept even more clarity. Finally, Paragraph 8 stipulates that the framework “should take into account the best available science and the worldviews and values of Indigenous Peoples,”

What Is in the Final Decision?

The final decision text came in at seven pages, with forty-nine paragraphs of decision-text jargon for readers to decipher.⁵ This section will walk through some of the key points.

Paragraphs 7 and 8 lay out the purpose and objectives of the framework, linking the entire document to enhancing action and support and reducing the loss and damage incurred from climate change. The purpose of the framework is to guide and review progress on achieving the GGA “with a view to

5 UNFCCC, *Matters Relating to Adaptation*, UN Doc. FCCC/PA/CMA/2023/L.18, December 13, 2023.

6 *Ibid.*, para. 7. Original, identical language found in: UN Doc. FCCC/PA/CMA/2022/10/Add.1, March 17, 2023, Decision 3/CMA.4, para. 9.

7 Anna Cabre, Olivia Fielding, and Michael Weisberg, “Refining the Global Goal on Adaptation ahead of COP28,” International Peace Institute, November 2023.

setting the tone for a framework that includes Indigenous peoples.

Paragraph 9 sets targets for a finalized list of thematic areas, a success for many developing countries. The final list includes water, food, health, ecosystems, infrastructure, poverty and livelihoods, and cultural heritage. The targets are all globally applicable, designed as focus areas for national adaptation efforts to ultimately achieve the high-level objective of well-being for people and planet.

The inclusion of these targets was a win for the world's most vulnerable populations. Negotiators representing these populations had repeatedly pointed out that targets for the iterative adaptation cycle alone (which some other subgroups argued for) would not be enough. Countries could have risk assessments, develop plans, and implement them, but without some idea of what a successfully adapted country looks like, there would be no real measure of successful adaptation. These targets are meant to help explain what success looks like while leaving the details of achieving it to countries.

Paragraph 9, along with its subparagraphs, was one of the most contentious parts of the agreement and the topic of much of the discussion in the 2023 workshops. The thematic areas had been mentioned in the Sharm el-Sheikh decision text, but many parties felt at the time that the list needed to be significantly refined. In addition, there was much debate over whether the framework should include targets for the thematic areas or whether that would be too prescriptive or too difficult to make globally applicable. This debate transcended the divide between developed and developing countries, as many subgroups held differing views. In the end, Paragraph 9 and its subparagraphs were the result of more collaboration and compromise than perhaps any other part of the text. This collaborative effort was not visible in the formal negotiations but took place on the sidelines, beginning with the workshops and continuing in the hallways of the conference center in Dubai. It was spearheaded by a small group of negotiators from AOSIS, the African Group, and the LDCs, who then worked with other subgroups of the G77 and China, as well as developed country partners, to find language

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that would work for all groups.

Targets for the steps of the iterative adaptation cycle (IAC) follow in Paragraph 10, complementing the thematic targets. These were less controversial, as parties agreed that strengthening each step of the cycle would be key to achieving the thematic targets and high-level objectives. However, these targets are notably missing any reference to means of implementation (MOI). Because the IAC is an established cycle with processes already in place in many countries, developing country parties felt that Paragraph 10 would be an ideal place to link the process to MOI, as opposed to linking them in the thematic targets, which are much broader. These parties argued that targets for the IAC are useless without guaranteeing the finances, technology transfer, and capacity building to achieve them. The lack of any reference to MOI within the paragraphs on targets was seen as a loss for developing countries.

The next block of paragraphs deals with communications, cooperation, and inclusion. Paragraph 17 requests each future Global Stocktake to include information on the targets listed in Paragraphs 9 and 10.

Paragraph 18 points out that many adaptation risks are transboundary, which is one of the main reasons a global goal was established in the first place—transboundary risks require collective cooperation and action and global solutions, as further emphasized in Paragraph 19. Paragraphs 20 and 21 highlight the role of cooperation among a wide variety of stakeholders. Paragraph 22 emphasizes the importance of engagement with Indigenous peoples and local communities, and Paragraph 23 encourages the involvement of children and youth.

Paragraphs 24–37 deal with the highly contentious topic of means of implementation. Understanding the tension requires some broader context. Many UNFCCC negotiations revolve around developing countries requesting climate finance, technology transfer, and capacity building from developed countries. While there is significant textual basis for this request in both the convention and the Paris Agreement, it continues to create problems, as developed countries do not want to be required

to finance all developing countries, particularly wealthier developing countries. Because of this, any decision that would require developed countries to provide developing countries with MOI creates tension in negotiations, even when it is not specifically relevant to the topic at hand.

In the final text, much of the language on MOI is broad, and, from the perspective of the G77 and China, it creates no impetus for the flow of MOI from developed toward developing countries. Phrases like “recognizes,” “reaffirms,” “recalls,” “reiterates,” and “notes with concern” dominate this section. While some of the phrases following these opening words are important, such as renewing the call to balance between finance for adaptation and mitigation in Paragraph 28, none of this language is new or very strong.

Paragraphs 31–33 are the strongest on MOI. Paragraph 31 reiterates the call to double adaptation finance from 2019 levels by 2025, recalling Article 9 of the Paris Agreement, which specifies that the provision of finance should take into consideration the priorities and special circumstances of countries with significant capacity constraints, such as LDCs and small island developing states. Paragraph 32 specifies that the extent to which the framework is implemented in developing countries depends on the provision of MOI by developed countries. Paragraph 33 emphasizes that continuous and enhanced support is urgently required to achieve the goals set out in Paragraphs 9 and 10. These are the three strongest paragraphs on MOI in the entire decision text, but they still lack strong language. One example of stronger language might have been,

Urges developed country Parties to provide developing country Parties with long-term, scaled-up, predictable, new, and additional finance, technology, and capacity building, consistent with relevant provisions, to implement urgent short-, medium-, and long-term adaptation actions, plans, programmes, and projects at the local, national, subregional, and regional levels, as well as to undertake the activities referred to in the framework.

Ultimately, these fourteen MOI paragraphs recall much important previous decision text but provide

little new or significant language on MOI for developing countries.

Paragraphs 34–36 link the framework to other stakeholders and constituted bodies, and Paragraph 37 encourages parties to consider the GGA framework when negotiating the new collective quantified goal (NCQG) on climate finance in 2024. The NCQG will update the previous goal of \$100 billion, setting a new goal for the amount of climate finance that should be provided to developing countries. Creating this link was tricky, as parties did not want to prejudge the specific amount. In the end, the link between the GGA and the NCQG is still vague, and it remains to be seen how parties will interpret it in discussions on the NCQG in 2024.

Paragraphs 38 and onward, which are on further work, created confusion for negotiators. Paragraph 38 seems to list priorities for consideration at the next session of the UNFCCC subsidiary bodies in Bonn in June 2024, but the list of topics for consideration is broad, and the exact means by which they are to be considered are unclear. This could be the basis for a new standing agenda item on the GGA, which developing country parties requested. Paragraph 39 launches a new work program to develop indicators for the targets, the modalities of which are still unclear (see below). Paragraphs 40–43 expand on the details of this work program, while Paragraphs 44, 45, and 47 assign tasks to constituted bodies, including the Adaptation Committee, in collaboration with the Consultative Group of Experts and the Least Developed Countries Expert Group.

As previously mentioned, in the final substantive bit of text, Paragraph 46 requests the Secretariat to undertake further work to understand transformational adaptation, for consideration at COP29 in November 2024. Hopefully, the results of this request will ease some of the tension around the phrase “transformational adaptation” and allow parties to understand it better. Parties still have different views on what transformational adaptation means, but AOSIS pushed hard for this request so that at the very least, come COP29, saying that the term is not well enough understood will no longer be an excuse.

What Happens Next?

As previously mentioned, Paragraph 39 establishes a new two-year work program to develop indicators for the targets in the framework. This was an attempt to combine the many different ideas put forward by parties for developing indicators, but it leaves many questions unanswered, including those of modalities, timeline, and who will be developing these indicators. Hopefully, these questions will be answered after parties submit proposed modalities and indicators in March 2024 and the UNFCCC secretariat synthesizes them in May. Many parties were adamant that the framework should be immediately usable and should draw on the plethora of existing indicators rather than reinventing the wheel.⁸ Many also argued that indicators should be determined by experts rather than negotiators. This will all depend upon the modalities, which will likely be decided by the subsidiary bodies in June.

The list of focus areas laid out in Paragraph 38 will certainly be part of the discussion at the subsidiary body meetings, but as previously mentioned, it is not clear what this will look like or whether these topics are also meant to come into the work program. For now, these will be areas for negotiators to consider, along with the work program, the framework, and the GGA as a whole.

The constituted bodies are tasked with developing training materials and technical guidance for implementing the framework, which will prove challenging, particularly as parties still have different visions of what the framework is and how it should be implemented. Some still think that countries should be able to choose which thematic targets to focus on or that the framework is mainly meant to be a tool for communication about adaptation for the Global Stocktake. However, the groups with the biggest ambitions for the framework view it as a tool for directing financial flows and guiding countries' adaptation efforts toward projects that promote well-being for people and planet. Things like food and water security, human health, and ecosystem protection will look different in different countries,

but strengthening the iterative adaptation cycle with the thematic GGA framework targets in mind will hopefully push all countries toward successful adaptation for the well-being of people and planet.

Conclusion

While the lack of strong language on means of implementation in the GGA decision text was disappointing for developing countries and the text itself could have benefitted from further engagement at the technical level, it includes many significant elements. Focusing the GGA on well-being for people and planet and providing further detail on what this means with targets around water, food, health, ecosystems, infrastructure, poverty and livelihoods, and cultural heritage is a huge step forward for global adaptation efforts. We can now point to these key areas when we speak of “enhanced adaptive capacity, strengthened resilience, and reduced vulnerability,” and once

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indicators are chosen and developed, we will be able to measure progress on the GGA. Furthermore, the targets to strengthen the iterative

adaptation cycle will hopefully lead to more robust adaptation processes within countries, enabling the achievement of the thematic targets. This package of targets was a success of COP28.

The text also opens the door for a shift from incremental to transformational adaptation. This will mean looking for adaptation solutions that address the root causes of problems instead of just responding to problems as they arise. This could eventually lead to progress on building resilience, particularly for transboundary risks with cascading impacts, which the text also mentions.

Negotiators will have to be strategic with the new work program for developing indicators, taking into account the lessons learned from the Glasgow–Sharm el-Sheikh work program, especially on how to most effectively use workshops. The workshops will need to be as collaborative and as unlike negotiations as possible. This time around will be slightly different, however, as many negotiators feel

⁸ For example indicators on food, water, health, and biodiversity, see tables in: Cabre, Fielding, and Weisberg, “Refining the Global Goal on Adaptation ahead of COP28.”

that the indicators should be developed by experts, not negotiated. We will see how parties are thinking about this at the subsidiary body meetings, but it will likely make sense for parties and negotiators to set the direction instead of the specific substance. This would entail laying out what kind of indicators are needed and in what areas and how they will fit into the thematic or process-based targets, leaving the rest to experts.

The list of indicators should be as short as possible to avoid overcomplicating the framework. It will also have to account for data gaps, which can be significant in small island developing states and many other developing countries. Furthermore, before new indicators are developed, consideration should be given to existing applicable indicators that countries already report on. Negotiators and experts do not need to start from scratch but should draw on what has been done in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework, and the Lancet Commission Report on lessons from the

COVID-19 pandemic, to name a few. This will not only lessen the workload and reporting burden for parties but also improve knowledge sharing, collaboration, and coordination between related frameworks and processes.

There is much work to be done this year and next to give life to the GGA framework adopted at COP28. It will require strategic planning and significant involvement of sectoral experts from around the world. For now, parties are coordinating among themselves and beginning to work on the submissions that will be due in March. At Bonn in June, parties will likely negotiate how to proceed for the next two years, and if all goes well, the world will have a fully fleshed out and operational framework for the Global Goal on Adaptation at COP30 in 2025. Whatever temperature scenario we find ourselves in over the next few decades, the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience will guide adaptation efforts, limiting loss and damage and preserving well-being for people and planet.

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