TRANSCRIPT
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Max Bearak: And what ended up coming out of this COP was a kind of kitchen sink approach where developed countries said, "we will take the lead in trying to get together around 300 billion a year and not starting right now but starting a decade from now." And the additional trillion will be made up by a huge variety of sources in the private sector, in multilateral development banks, carbon markets, you name it, basically everything else.

Rob Stavins: Welcome to Environmental Insights, a podcast from the Harvard Environmental Economics Program. I'm your host, Rob Stavins, a professor here at the Harvard Kennedy School and director of the program.

In the past, I've had the pleasure of engaging in conversations in this podcast series with two reporters from the *New York Times*, Coral Davenport and Lisa Friedman. And both Coral and Lisa remarked during our discussions about the irony of my asking them questions about climate change policy instead of the more typical pattern of them asking me questions. Well, today we have a single *New York Times* reporter taking the place of two of them, so we know that he is really good. And I'm referring to my guest today, Max Bearak. Max covers energy policy and politics, approaches for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and important for us today, the global climate negotiations such as those that recently took place in Baku in Azerbaijan. Welcome Max.

Max Bearak: Thanks, Rob. It's a pleasure to be here.

Rob Stavins: So, before we talk about your experiences at COP 29 in Baku and your assessment for that matter of where things stand, our listeners always find it interesting to find out a bit about your background, how you came to be where you are. So, where did you grow up?

Max Bearak: I grew up all over the world, actually. My parents were journalists in fact, and I moved all over with them. And since graduating from college, I've continued to move around. I've lived in India and in different parts of Africa for most of my life. That's where I got my start as a journalist and joined *The Times* two years ago after about a decade as a foreign correspondent to cover climate, but in the way that a foreign correspondent might.

Rob Stavins: Now indeed, I see from, I don't know if it was from your online resume at *The Times* or somewhere else, that you were a freelancer in India for *The Times*, then you were at the *Washington Post* covering foreign affairs in Washington, east Africa, and then indeed in Ukraine during the first six months of the war. What really struck me, however, was that I think your first position, I read somewhere out of Carleton College in Minnesota, was as a wilderness ranger for the U.S. Forest Service. Do I have that right?

Max Bearak: That's right. I was based out in eastern Nevada in a place called White Pine County.

Rob Stavins: But then you returned to sort of the family roots in terms of pursuing a career in journalism.

Max Bearak: Yeah, I couldn't escape.

Rob Stavins: Yeah, I know how that is. So, let's turn now to your experience at COP 29. Was this the first of the annual conferences of the parties you've attended, or have you gone previously?

Max Bearak: This is my third COP actually. So. I was at Sharm El-Sheikh and Dubai and now this one.

Rob Stavins: Can you compare them? I don't mean so much in terms of the substance; we'll get into what the outcomes were, but in terms of the feeling, the venue, how would you compare the three?

Max Bearak: Ever since Glasgow, as I understand it, these conferences have become enormous, tens of thousands of people far beyond the kind normal ambit of negotiators, and this one was no different. I think more than 50,000 people were there and the preparations were just fine for that amount of people. Logistically, it went off without a hitch. But I definitely joked with some people that it was a bit like a sensory deprivation chamber. They had it set up in a stadium, which sounds like it would have plenty of fresh air and sunlight, but in fact, it was all kind of within tented, lightless or fluorescently lit structures where you didn't know what time of day it was.

Rob Stavins: Yeah, a windowless venue, in fact, right,

Max Bearak: Windowless, and then towards the end without food or drink, after the deadline inevitably passed and negotiations went deep into overtime, and we were left with Snickers bars.

Rob Stavins: So, something that I've noticed and written about has been the increasing prominence and even the increasing significance in some ways of the activities and discussions at the Annual Conference of the Parties that are outside of the UNFCCC negotiations, sometimes among governments, but not under the UNFCCC negotiations. An example would be the Global Methane Pledge, but also discussions among members of civil society, NGOs, trade associations, even universities, and for that matter, the press. And it seems to me that the COPs now have more in common with the annual economic festivities in Davos than with WTO negotiations, for example. So, I've come to refer to

each year's festivities as Climate Expo 2023 or Climate Expo 2024, which I don't mean in a pejorative way or even cynically. It's just that that's what it's become. And I'm wondering whether or not you had a reaction along those lines or were you so focused on the official negotiations that you were really immersed in that?

Max Bearak: I'd say that's a fair characterization. These things run a little more than two weeks, and the first week is really akin to what you're describing there when world leaders come in and they're hangers on as well. And it turns into a kind of pre-G20 as well, which is now almost always concurrent with COP. You have it as a venue, not just for civil society and tech entrepreneurs and that type of thing to talk, but for world leaders to kind of see each other and shake hands and then travel to wherever their next summit is. Whereas the second week is definitely more focused on negotiations. And this year I was only there for the second week, so I was definitely more focused on the nitty gritty of what would come out of the final document.

Rob Stavins: I see, I see. So, before we get into the specifics of what did come out finally with the key outcomes, can you tell me, was there anything about COP 29 in a substantive way or a personal way that fundamentally surprised you compared to your expectations?

Max Bearak: I've always been skeptical of the notion that who the host is matters all that much. It seems kind of like you just need a venue and the powers that be will take it from there. But I think the feeling that I got from talking to so many different negotiators was of really intense disappointment with Azerbaijan as hosts that many people felt they were so inexperienced and really geopolitically, not all too powerful themselves, so that they couldn't pull the heft and the weight needed to bring together the really different sides of this debate. I think many people rightly found it unlikely to think that the Azerbaijanis could push the Russians or the Saudis or the EU even to go in a certain way when they themselves coming from such a compromised place in the negotiations. So, I think that that was surprising to me to know how much the host country and their ability to bring people together actually matters.

Rob Stavins: So, I saw that what you're describing, not so much in terms of the host country, but in terms of the individuals who actually had the presidency of the COP, the presiding officer. The comparison to in Copenhagen with Prime Minister Rasmussen, who just did a terrible job of trying to get to consensus at the end, and then one year later, the foreign minister of Mexico in Cancun, Patricia Espinoza, who was absolutely brilliant when the same kind of objections were raised by five countries essentially objecting to the world economic order but focusing on climate change. And she listened to what they had to say, and then she's commented, this is not a direct quote, but close, “consensus does not require unanimity.” And then she put down the gavel and brought the meeting to a close, adopting what was the Cancun Agreement.

Max Bearak: Right. I think that the same could be true between this year's COP and last year's. Many people doubted last year's COP president who was chairman of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, seemingly the worst choice possible as COP president, and yet somebody who later many agreed was actually an ideal choice. Somebody who brought together fossil fuel producing countries with sinking islands states and actually found really groundbreaking space for consensus between them. Whereas this year, the COP

President Mukhtar Babayev was basically nowhere to be seen. I don't think I saw him once before the final plenary.

Rob Stavins: Oh, that's interesting. I think something our listeners would find interesting, they may not be aware of it, was how it came to be that Azerbaijan became the host because that ties in with your background in foreign affairs. You're having spent time in Ukraine for that matter. Can you explain how it is that it wound up in Azerbaijan?

Max Bearak: Yeah, it's a weird little bit of UN protocol. Every year a different region of the world, and these regions are very nebulous. So, this year, the region that was meant to host COP was roughly former Soviet states as well as a bit of a few other Eastern European countries that weren't part of the Soviet Union. And within those discussions, you have to reach consensus and essentially unanimous consensus, or at least the most powerful country in that region will have to sign off on it in the end. The most powerful country in that region is Russia, and Russia was able to veto the candidacies of pretty much every country in that region that opposes their invasion of Ukraine, and that left Armenia and Azerbaijan as the two last potential hosts. And of course, those two countries had been fighting a war against each other. And so, this whole thing was just very tricky. We didn't know until the very last day of COP in Dubai who would be hosting the next year. And finally, Russia tipped the scales in some kind of backroom negotiations for Azerbaijan, which is better for everybody's sake because Armenia not only is a much poorer country and less capable of hosting COP than Azerbaijan, but had just lost in this war against Azerbaijan and has a lot more important domestic things to deal with rather than being kind of swept away into this festival, if you will, or this kind of economic summit.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. So, my reaction, I had never been an Azerbaijan before, and my reaction was that this is what it feels like to be in a former Soviet Republic that remained within the sphere of influence of Russia, the Russian Federation.

Max Bearak: I'd say that's true. The current leader of Azerbaijan is very close with Vladimir Putin on a personal level, and Azerbaijan does lots of business with Russia, trade both in its fossil fuels and in other commodities, and essentially acts as go between between Russia and Europe. It is playing both sides. Azerbaijan in some ways relies on Russia and Europe relies on Azerbaijan when it comes to Azerbaijan's main product, which is gas.

Rob Stavins: So, let's take a look at the outcomes of COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan. This was couched in advance as the finance COP. That was going to be the big issue is talking about finance and reaching agreements on that. Can you briefly tell us what do you see as being the major outcomes, including, but you don't need to limit yourself to the finance aspect?

Max Bearak: Sure. Well, finance definitely was the be all and all of this COP. I think the best way to understand it is that the UN's own experts were asked to look into how much financing developing countries need over and above what they're able to marshal from their own budgets, so as to transition to cleaner economies that can meet their own net zero pledges. And that number was put by those UN experts at about 1.3 trillion dollars a year. And so that's what developing countries came into this COP saying, “we need to find a way to put together a bunch of different sources of money such that we can be assured we're going to get that 1.3 trillion a year as soon as possible.” And what ended

up coming out of this COP was a kind of kitchen sink approach where developed countries said, “we will take the lead in trying to get together around 300 billion dollars a year, and not starting right now, but starting a decade from now.” And the additional trillion will be made up by a huge variety of sources in the private sector, in multilateral development banks, carbon markets, you name it, basically everything else. And developing countries were left with a sense that their needs were not being taken very seriously.

Rob Stavins: I was not there, certainly, I was not in the plenary at the end. I heard that at the very end when this was gaveled through that some of the delegations were so upset, including the head of the Indian delegation, that there was an attempt to rush to the stage to try to lead to a collapse actually of the talks of, if not a walkout. Did something like that actually transpire at the end?

Max Bearak: It reminds me, Rob, of what you said about the Mexican COP president a decade or more ago. The same approach has essentially been taken the past two years in Dubai and in Baku, which is to say that consent doesn't necessarily need to be unanimous. It just needs to be gavelable and not with people rushing the stage. Now, I don't think anybody was actually planning on rushing the stage at Baku, but the very first speaker after that gavel was the representative from India, Chandni Raina, who is a spokesman for the Indian Finance Ministry. And she gave one of the most scathing speeches I've ever heard at a COP really tearing down the Azerbaijani presidency as leading essentially a sham process that did in the end push through a resolution that most developing countries found to be an insult.

Rob Stavins: So, thinking back to the Obama years with these annual Conferences of the Parties, that was a period of time in which co-leadership by the United States and China working very much together from the head of state level on down was very, very important. In fact, I've always said that we wouldn't have gotten the Paris Agreement because there wouldn't have been the NDCs without China and the US going first. And then obviously that dissipated during the Trump 1.0 and didn't fully come back with the Biden administration. But now with Trump having been elected just days before the beginning of the Conference of the Parties, I have two questions in that regard. One is, was the United States delegation relatively muted, because in some sense they're lame duck, or were they playing the same kind of role that they'd played over the last two years? You've been to three, so you can compare it to those two. And then I'm also interested in your perspective about China. What role did you see as China playing and if possible, compared to the past?

Max Bearak: Well, China typically plays a very behind the scenes role. It’s rare to get public statements from China at COP. And really the main statement that China tried to get across in Baku was to say that in the past eight years, they have provided 24 billion US dollars, according to them, in climate finance. And that was a way of them saying that we may not be classified as a developed country, but we are very much contributing to global climate finance. The Americans, if you ask them, sitting down with John Podesta, the US Climate Envoy, for example, he would tell you the US was extremely active in these negotiations.

Whether that's true or not is kind of less important in some ways than whether other countries took them seriously at all. They may have been active, but I think with the near certainty that the US will pull out of the Paris Agreement and renege on its climate finance obligations, I think they certainly may have been active, but I'm not sure that anybody felt like they could plan on US support being there in the coming years, which ultimately puts a lot more pressure on both China and the European Union as the most likely sources of bilateral climate finance.

Rob Stavins: I've often said to students who are interested in attending the COP, and quite a few did this year actually from Harvard, and obviously from many other universities and colleges. I've often said to them that if what you really want to accomplish is to understand the Conference for the Parties and the NFCCC and what's going on and what's happening, that you're better off not going and just staying home, get online, read the reports from the press, read from the many websites of various individuals and institutions who were there. But in listening to you, I get the sense that although that may or may not be correct for students, it's not for a member of the press. That your presence there you would consider to be essential to meaningful and insightful reporting. Is that fair to say or not? Maybe?

Max Bearak: Yeah, I mean, as much as I don't particularly enjoy being at COP, if I'm being perfectly honest with you…

Rob Stavins: Likewise.

Max Bearak: You've got to be there. You as a reporter, you are being called to off the record and on background briefings with different heavyweights, whether that's the EU or countries within the EU or the Americans or the Brazilians who've started playing a much bigger role at these COPs and of course are hosting next year. And at those briefings, you really do get a sense of who is being intransigent and who is trying to get what. Those are the briefings that tell us things that are essential to know, like that the Saudi delegation has been such a thorn in the side of reaching agreements year after year. Those are venues where reporters are being told these things, and of course we have to go figure out whether that's actually true or not. And of course, the Saudis are… It's not that they deny that it's true, they just decline to comment generally to the media, but without being there, we wouldn't get those insights.

Rob Stavins: You mentioned the Saudis. They are not only remarkably strong in terms of their preferences, which are very clear what their preferences and self-interest is, but they are also remarkably effective. I've seen it not so much in the UNFCCC negotiations, but it's something parallel to that, which is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the IPCC. So, for years, I've been a lead author and a coordinating lead author running one part of it. And in the government approval sessions, which are a plenary with 195 countries, they just stand out. It's amazing the degree to which they are influential across the board and very, very effective.

Max Bearak: Their effectiveness is perhaps the greatest argument that critics of COP have. I think it is a process that while it may not require unanimous consent, what that really means is it doesn't require unanimous consent from less powerful countries. The Saudis still need

to be brought along. They have immense influence at these, and so they can jam things up. And one might argue that a system that only needed a two thirds majority or something like that would greatly diminish the influence of Saudi Arabia and Russia and other states that are trying to slow roll the energy transition.

Rob Stavins: You're saying that, Max, makes me think about the fact that periodically there are calls for abandoning or seriously reforming the UNFCCC process. We heard it after Copenhagen because things went very, very poorly there, and I've been sensing a bit of that over the recent days. Again, a lot of discussion about that, talking about alternatives to the UNFCCCC process, to climate clubs, the possibility of a carbon pricing club emerging from the EU CBAM or some other venue, maybe the G20, the C30. Have you been hearing anything like that?

Max Bearak: We hear about it every year. I don't think I heard anything this year to make me believe that those kind of reform efforts are going to imminently take place. These negotiations are interesting. If you go there, and I guess I would recommend that students of climate politics go and see these because in some ways, the negotiations distill global power, and it's one of the few places that you can see that because real multilateralism is actually still alive at COP. Whereas in the UN more broadly, I'm not sure that that's really truly the case. Every country really does get its say at COP, but what you end up with at the end is, and I didn't end up using this quote in my final story, but I was talking with Avinash Pursaud, who is an economist and an advisor to the prime minister of Barbados, Mia Motley, and really a great thinker on climate finance. And the way he put it was, the final agreement, it's the boundary between what is politically possible and what's needed. And so, you get to the lower end of what's needed, which is the higher end of what's politically possible, and that's essentially what happens every year. So, watching that boundary tells you exactly where we are, and I think that that's what is fascinating about COP is the distillation of where that line is on a given year.

Rob Stavins: And so, with that, in terms of, you're saying that's where we are. Let me finish up by asking you about where we're going. Next year's COP30 in Brazil is one of those periodic COPs that because of what is scheduled to happen, that is considered to be a relatively important one. Do you have any prediction to offer or just any kind of commentary about what you anticipate or how we should think about COP30 next year?

Max Bearak: At the broadest level, this COP in Brazil is meant to be important because countries will be presenting their new pledges to reach net zero, which of course, the yards sick by which we measure climate progress globally. So, that's really important and that'll still happen. But I really feel some pity for them as hosts because there are, I would say, expectations are as low as they may ever have been for multilateralism at these COPs. I think the reason that we even got a deal despite so much discord in Baku was the feeling that if we don't get a climate finance deal now, we might have to wait half a decade before having that kind of multilateral spirit come back. And so, I think the COP in Brazil is going to be, it's going to be hampered. The vibes are going to be more pessimistic even than this one, and it's just going to be really tough for them to provide a sense of optimism and the sense that the world is making progress and taking a step forward, which is ultimately what all of these COPs strive to send everyone home with a sense of.

Rob Stavins: Well, so I'll just hope, Max, that next year in Brazil that at least you're able to find it a bit more enjoyable than it was this year in Baku.

Max Bearak: I hope so too.

Rob Stavins: Yeah. Well, listen, thank you very much, Max, for having taken time to join us today.

Max Bearak: Thank you, Rob. It was a pleasure.

Rob Stavins: So, my guest today has been Max Bearak. He covers energy politics and the global climate negotiations for the *New York Times*. Please join us again for the next episode of Environmental Insights: Conversations on Policy and Practice from the Harvard Environmental Economics Program. I'm your host, Rob Stavins. Thanks for listening.

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