

After COP30, What's Next for the UNFCCC?

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The 30th Conference of Parties (COP30) took place under difficult conditions, facing geopolitical turmoil, the absence of the United States, and a period of transition within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. Despite these challenges, the COP managed to deliver on a number of key outcomes: More than 190 countries demonstrated their continued commitment to climate by reaching agreement on 56 decisions. Looking ahead, if the Paris Agreement's goals are to be achieved, countries must seize opportunities to enhance international cooperation for climate action and embrace the vision of a 'two-tier multilateralism' set out by the COP30 President.



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HIGHLIGHTS

COP30 delivered on its mandates despite geopolitical challenges. Over 190 countries came together and demonstrated their commitment to the Paris Agreement by reaching agreement on 56 decisions.

We are entering a phase of two-tier multilateralism. The COP30 President has articulated that while consensus based normative COP signals will continue to have an important role, international cooperative initiatives that do not require consensus will be increasingly crucial for implementation—including in the context of a shifting geopolitical landscape.

COP30 marked an important shift from negotiation to implementation. The alignment of the global climate action agenda with the Paris Agreement's global stocktake process—stabilized in the five-year plan of the Climate High-Level Champions—is potentially transformational. It is critical that Parties and non-Parties seize the opportunity.

The Paris Agreement is fully operational. Whether it achieves its goals or not depends on political commitment and leadership—not on further negotiations. What countries spend their money on shows reveals their true priorities.

The challenge of COP30

The 30th Conference of the Parties (COP30) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held in Belém, Brazil, was always going to be difficult. Coming ten years after the Paris Agreement was adopted, the geopolitics could hardly have been more challenging at any point in the history of the UNFCCC. On top of rising global tensions, the COP took place against the backdrop of the world's largest historic climate polluter—the United States— withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and not sending a delegation to the COP for the first time since 1992. Following COP30, the United States also signaled its intention to withdraw from the UNFCCC and reversed much of the basis of its domestic policy action.

Even with favorable geopolitical conditions, Belém would still have been difficult. The UNFCCC process is struggling to navigate the transition away from high-level negotiations to adopt the Paris Agreement and the guidance needed to operationalize it—the status quo for over a decade—toward a new reality focused on implementation.

As if that transition were not challenging enough, COP30 took place in a context where, even as the Paris Agreement is starting to work as intended, confidence in its efficacy is waning.¹ With each successive COP, global temperatures continue to increase, climate impacts around the world are increasingly frequent and severe, and negotiated UNFCCC outcomes are perceived as failing to tangibly respond to the urgent needs and priorities of people around the world.

The general reaction of those of us engaged in the UNFCCC has been to focus on what we typically focus on: how to fix the shortcomings of the Paris Agreement through more negotiations. But this approach loses sight of the fact that, while multilateralism provides the framework within which governments can and must act, it is action that is missing, not more normative signals.

An open letter published by the Club of Rome during COP29 stated that “...the global policy framework is scientifically rigorous and economically sound and complete. But the framework alone is not enough.”² Unless the underlying politics are fixed, no amount of tinkering with the UNFCCC process and Paris Agreement will close the ambition and implementation gaps. Now governments must meet the moment.

The ultimate objective of the UNFCCC is the “...stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system.”³ On this, country positions coming into COP30 could be simplistically characterized by placing them at two ends of a spectrum of approaches.

At one end, a number of countries—in response to the scientific consensus that has emerged since the Paris Agreement was adopted—pushed for a strong commitment to more ambitious action in Belém, including to follow up on signals and targets as part of the first global stocktake (GST1). This approach follows on from earlier attempts at successive COPs to push countries to increase the ambition of their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) outside the rhythm of the Paris Agreement five-year ambition cycle, even as proponents of such an approach would admit privately that it would be politically impossible to do so themselves.

On the other end of the spectrum, countries feel that pressure to update the ambition in their nationally determined contributions more frequently



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represents a de facto attempt to alter the agreed terms and cadence of the Paris Agreement's ambition cycle and impinges on the nationally determined nature of setting ambition. Countries on this end of the spectrum are also of the view that the sectoral targets and signals that have emerged since the Paris Agreement was adopted, including from GST1, represent a shift from the collective nature of achieving the Paris Agreement's temperature goal toward an approach that disproportionately impacts only some countries.

This divide could, to some extent, be overcome only by reaching a clearer common understanding outside of the negotiating rooms of what achieving net-zero emissions globally in 2050 will mean for different regions and countries, in a way that all Parties to the UNFCCC can see a positive future for themselves.

Nothing represented the challenges COP30 faced more clearly than the central issue of climate finance, which is at the core of the gap between stated ambition and what is actually being implemented. While the historic outcome of COP29 on the new collective quantified goal on climate finance (NCQG) represented a significant political stretch for donor countries, it fell far short of the reassurance and certainty that the majority of developing countries need to implement their climate plans.⁴

There are two truths here. First, international public finance alone will never be enough to fund the achievement of the Paris Agreement's goals. Second, it is evident that when other geopolitical challenges arise, there seem to be limitless amounts of public finance made available to deal with those. Spending on defense is going up at the same time as development aid is going down. The reality is that, despite the rhetoric, the richest and most powerful countries are still not prioritizing the climate crisis over other issues that they view as more immediate and pressing.

That is their sovereign right. But it is a choice with consequences—climate ambition and implementation continue to be incremental and fall far short of the transformative approach the science says is urgently required. As such, it is a choice that must be acknowledged and owned and so form a solid basis for the way forward. Continuing with the current approach of repeatedly generating vague UNFCCC decisions about increasing climate finance, without specificity as to how they will be implemented, risks: perpetrating a collective denial of reality, avoiding dealing with the underlying issues, and rendering the UNFCCC increasingly irrelevant.

Given all of these challenges and dynamics, it is remarkable that over 190 countries at COP30 managed to reach agreement on a number of negotiating issues and delivered on its key mandates, with 56 decisions adopted by consensus. The fact that they did so needs to be celebrated.⁵

Nevertheless, media commentary on the COP30 outcome focused largely on Parties' 'failure' to reference fossil fuels. Whatever the specific numbers for and against were, it is absolutely clear that entrenched positions meant that there was no possibility of achieving a consensus among the countries present in Belém to adopt a fossil fuel transition roadmap. If such references to fossil fuels are to be set up as the litmus test for success of a COP, it is the responsibility of the proponents of such initiatives to do the diplomatic work—well in advance of the COP—needed to ensure a strong possibility of achieving such an outcome. Creating high expectations that cannot be delivered damages the UNFCCC process.

The Paris Agreement, if fully implemented, will result in a transition away from fossil fuels. Given that so many delegations were pushing for Belém to be an



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'implementation' COP, it is striking how little mobilization there was to use the existing Paris Agreement architecture—including elements of its five-year ambition cycle—to advance implementation.

For instance, the vast majority of countries submitted their NDCs months after the deadline on February 10, 2025, with three G20 countries arriving at the COP without having submitted a new NDC at all. The NDCs that were submitted collectively fall well below the levels of ambition required to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement.⁶ Independent analysis also indicates that the ambition of many individual NDCs, including those of G20 countries is sufficient. Furthermore, 114 countries failed to submit a biennial transparency report (BTR) by the deadline on December 31, 2024. There has been little to no political cost for failing to meet these key deadlines.

Additionally, the facilitative, multilateral consideration of progress (FMCP) review has gained no political or media attention, largely being regarded a technical-level sideshow. In these reviews, countries present on how they are doing against their climate targets and other countries can challenge them on their progress.

Transparency and peer pressure are at the very core of the Paris Agreement's five-year cycle. At the same time, Parties seem unable or unwilling to use available tools to help the agreement deliver. They are stuck in a treaty negotiation mode when there is no treaty to negotiate and when emissions reductions require national action more than COP decisions.

Commentators are increasingly questioning the value of the UNFCCC process and asking whether the frequency and scale of these meetings, including the COPs and its subsidiary and constituted bodies, should be assessed against concrete results they deliver. At the very least, it is questionable whether an annual COP involving ministers is still necessary—arguably it diverts attention and resources away from domestic implementation where the attention now needs to be. Many of the limited resources countries have are focused on a permanent negotiating dynamic rather than delivering on what has already been agreed.

An annual convening of ministers and leaders generates high expectations of outcomes to match the level of attendance—which is damaging when those expectations are not met. Not every UNFCCC meeting can generate breakthroughs such as that at COP21 in Paris—and yet this seems to be the expectation. Moving away from annual COPs would allow for a greater focus on the technical work needed to facilitate domestic implementation and save high-level participation for when it is needed to give political direction.

Serious budget shortfalls for the UNFCCC and other international processes are another reason to consider moving away from a COP every year. Other multilateral fora—such as the Convention on Biological Diversity—work well, and arguably better, without an annual COP.

The ever growing agendas for COPs are putting the transparency and legitimacy of the decision making process under significant strain, as successive Presidencies are faced with an almost impossible task of delivering on an increasing number of mandated outcomes. The decision at COP30 on the indicators for the global goal on adaptation serves as a recent example, as several groups of countries raised concerns about the process of its adoption. That is not to mention the increasing number of mandated events that COPs also have to deliver. Unless there is some restraint in future, COPs risk collapsing



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under their own weight. The increasing centrality of the notion of a COP 'package,' and that all issues have to be addressed at every COP, means that Parties slow down progress in some areas until they see movement in others. Over the years, this dynamic has resulted in reducing the effectiveness of the Subsidiary Bodies in delivering clean decision text at the intersessional meetings. This trend needs to be reversed and a multi-year planning approach to address issues across several COPs needs to be explored, while giving assurance to Parties that their priorities will not be dropped.

Despite the need for reform, negotiations on making the COP process more efficient have made little to no progress over the last decade or so—largely due to a lack of political attention.

So what's the way forward?

The greatest challenge for the UNFCCC process going forward will be how it can catalyze accelerated climate action in a world where multilateralism is under considerable pressure and seems to be giving way to a more fragmented approach. This is affecting many international fora that deal with climate change, and is not limited to the UNFCCC. One way forward could be to embrace opportunities for enhanced international cooperation that do not rely solely on consensus-based universal multilateralism.

In his recent speech at Davos, Prime Minister Mark Carney said the quiet part out loud—while countries of the Global North prospered under the post-World War II consensus, those in the Global South did not fare as well. He said:

We knew the story of the international rules-based order was partially false—that the strongest would exempt themselves when convenient, that trade rules were enforced asymmetrically. And we knew that international law applied with varying rigour depending on the identity of the accused or the victim.⁷

This general observation has been increasingly evident in the specific dynamics of the international climate negotiations. Over the last two decades or so it is clear that not only has the center of gravity shifted from West to East, but that any faith developing countries had that they would benefit if they played by the rules has visibly diminished—nowhere more so than in discussions around climate finance. More generally, while global events over the last 12 months or so have left countries of the Global North in shock, it is highly revealing that the response of developing countries—including in the context of the UNFCCC—has been far more sanguine, and could be summed up as "it has always been like that for us."

Although Prime Minister Carney was speaking more generally about the role of 'middle powers,' his speech indirectly makes a case for the importance of the UNFCCC and its future role, albeit in an evolving context:

A world of fortresses will be poorer, more fragile and less sustainable.... If great powers abandon even the pretense of rules and values for the unhindered pursuit of their power and interests, the gains from transactionalism will become harder to replicate...Collective investments... are cheaper than everyone building their own fortresses. Shared standards reduce fragmentations. Complementarities are positive sum....⁸

In his twelfth letter, the COP30 President stated:

[...] COP30 [also] shed light on the limitations of climate multilateralism and of formal consensus decision-making. As we advance our work in 2026, let us view such limits not as immovable boundaries, but as precious signals that teach us that climate multilateralism has matured and is ready to evolve. To keep pace with global warming, multilateralism must learn to operate at more than one institutional speed – to become a two-tier multilateralism...A first institutional speed should remain anchored in consensus. It ensures legitimacy, universality, legal clarity, and collective direction – remaining indispensable and irreplaceable, as was the rule-making process for the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement and its Rulebook. A second institutional speed should focus on implementation. It should enable open coalitions and capable actors to mobilize resources, deploy solutions, generate learning at scale – without reopening questions of direction already settled by consensus in the first tier.⁹

In the context of a two-tier multilateralism, the COP30 President went on to outline initial thinking on how he intends to take forward his important initiative to develop, under his own responsibility, roadmaps to transition away from fossil fuels and to halt and reverse deforestation.¹⁰ This type of innovation, using the office of the President to develop “political and technical platforms to mobilize countries and non-state stakeholders” is what is needed given the urgency of the moment and the willingness of significant numbers of governments, as well as non-state actors, to move forward more aggressively on climate action. And as he stated, this kind of initiative can reinforce and support the ‘first tier’ of consensus-based multilateralism.

The President’s roadmaps initiative and his characterization of a dual multilateralism mirrors the approach to international relations that Prime Minister Carney spoke about in Davos:

This is not naive multilateralism, nor is it relying on their institutions. It’s building coalitions that work – issues by issue, with partners who share enough common ground to act together. In some cases, this will be the vast majority of nations....¹¹

Indeed, the negotiation and adoption of the Paris Agreement anticipated the need for a two-tier approach by establishing the action agenda, where different coalitions of countries and non-state actors come together—outside the consensus-based negotiating setting—in voluntary international cooperatives initiatives (ICIs) to take forward different aspects of climate action.

The most transformational outcome from COP30—and one that has not yet received the attention it deserves—built on this: restructuring the global climate action agenda to align with taking forward the outcomes of the GST. Now stabilized through the five-year plan of the Climate High-Level Champions, this development represents the most radical evolution of the UNFCCC process since the Paris Agreement was adopted, and responds directly to the need to navigate the transition to implementation, driven by enhanced international cooperation between Parties and non-Party stakeholders, through ICIs.¹² The COP30 President’s new structure effectively co-opts the action agenda as a delivery arm of the global stocktake process. The action agenda now builds on the commitments made by countries, thereby operationalizing the two-tier approach that the COP30 President refers to.

The COP30 President’s letter prompts deeper reflection on what requires consensus to make progress on implementing the Paris Agreement and what does not.

In this vein, it is worth recalling Article 7.2(c) of the UNFCCC, which states that the COP shall make, within its mandate, decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention, which includes facilitating “at the request of two or more Parties, the coordination of measures adopted by them to address climate change and its effects, taking into account the differing circumstances, responsibilities and capabilities of the Parties and their respective commitments under the Convention” without them needing to involve all Parties.¹³ Article 7.2(c) would offer the possibility of such initiatives being actionable in Convention processes (e.g., reviews, institutions, secretariat support), even if it were on the basis of extra-budgetary funding. It seems that this provision has never been used, but it could represent a way to bring significant ICIs more clearly under the umbrella of the UNFCCC without the need for consensus.

Prime Minister Carney spoke of a new approach; one that:

...means building what we claim to believe in, rather than waiting for the old order to be restored. It means creating institutions and agreements that function as described...We know the old order is not coming back. We shouldn't mourn it. Nostalgia is not a strategy, but we believe that from the fracture, we can build something bigger, better, stronger, more just....¹⁴

Cooperation is key to the transition from negotiation to implementation, particularly in the context of a fractured multilateralism. There needs to be far more emphasis on enhanced international cooperation on climate action,¹⁵ including by taking things forward plurilaterally where consensus cannot be achieved yet real progress can nevertheless be delivered. The initiatives announced by the COP30 President on the fossil fuel roadmap and forests are examples of emerging international cooperation leadership to take forward the outcomes of the GST. Urgent thinking is required on how the multiple and growing number of work programs under the UNFCCC and more effectively support real-world action.

Effective national climate action requires buttressing international cooperation at all levels—at bilateral and regional levels, among coalitions of engaged countries, and at the multilateral level. Coalitions of countries on climate action should involve a wider range than the “middle powers” Prime Minister Carney referred to in his Davos speech.

Just as many in the climate community seem to be retreating from international cooperation as a focus of work, this is exactly the moment to lean in. As we enter into a more complicated and multi-polar context in international relations, now is the time to engage in defining what that means for climate action. The old world is not coming back—so we should not waste time anticipating its return. This moment of ‘rupture,’ as Prime Minister Carney describes it, must be treated as an opportunity to transition into something that is more effective, impactful, and results based—something “...bigger, better, stronger, more just...” building on the Paris Agreement and the Convention and the tools they provides us.¹⁶

COP31 will mark the start of the second global stocktake under the Paris Agreement, a two-year process that will inform the next round of NDCs that will be submitted in 2030. This process must accelerate the efforts started at COP30 to turn the rhetoric on shifting from negotiations to implementation, toward actually doing it. That two-year process must facilitate and build on: enhanced ambition from countries working together on focused initiatives; the strengthened and GST-focused action agenda; ‘booster processes’ such as the Global Implementation Accelerator and Belém Mission to 1.5; and the impact of the COP30 President's roadmaps.



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Endnotes

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