



Bridging the Disconnect: COP30 and the Way Forward in Climate Governance

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No. 232/2025 dated 1 December 2025

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By Adam X. Hansen

SYNOPSIS

Despite its emphasis on collective action, civil society and Indigenous-led backlash at COP30 highlight a persistent gap in climate governance. Addressing state-centrism and COP lobbyism while adopting a human security approach is essential to reclaiming global climate action's original ambition of responding to a crisis facing all.

COMMENTARY

Ten years on from the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change, this year's Conference of the Parties (COP30) in Belém, Brazil, emphasised the importance of collective action. Yet, continued tensions with civil society and Indigenous actors, as most visibly manifested in [activists](#) storming the venue, highlight a persisting trend of climate action failing to connect with those most affected.

Amid oil drilling expansion, forest clearing for a connecting highway to the host city, and soaring accommodation costs, COP30 has become the epitome of many of the shortages facing global climate governance. In its current performative structure, the framework risks being shaped by superficial commitments and detachment from people on the ground level. Arriving at a crossroads, the way forward starts by asking: Who is COP really for?

An Agenda off the Mark

Since 1992, COP – the annual summit tied to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – has held the crucial role of seeking to move governance beyond national borders in addressing a global crisis. Yet, while each summit concludes with new provisions celebrated by many state representatives, gaps in commitment and funding remain persistent features of the wider process.

A root cause stems from the decision-making agent itself: states. In its current form, states may freely interact at COPs on the basis of protecting national interests and maximising gains. Competing interests among the more than 190 participating state actors have therefore led to outcomes that are too often watered down. Continued heavy resistance to a fossil fuel “[phase-out](#)” and this year’s [infighting](#) over who will host next year’s summit demonstrate a state-centric approach that derails the event’s wider purpose and ultimately stalls the agenda.

These challenges come in addition to a wider flaw in perspective. State-centrism means that action largely responds to climate change as a national security threat. Thus, calls for accelerated responses primarily come from states whose very [existence](#) is at stake. This approach overlooks the persistent climate-induced pressures facing local communities, including rising economic hardship, livelihood losses and displacement. While these factors may eventually contribute to national insecurity, the primary effects manifest at the human level, regardless of national borders.

Remaining Tensions With Frontline Communities

Against this backdrop, this year’s call for COP30 to embrace the spirit of “Mutirão”, meaning collective action and mobilisation, was a welcomed emphasis. To this end, signs of progress were visible, including a [tenfold increase](#) to more than 3,000 invited Indigenous participants and the launch of an Indigenous leadership [training](#) programme. However, these advancements have been overshadowed by the simultaneous expansion of oil drilling and infrastructure construction to host COP30, inflicting fresh environmental damage on the Amazon rainforest.

As a result, tensions at this year’s COP should not come as a surprise. Between a women’s Indigenous protest demanding a full stop to [Amazonian inroads](#), activists storming the event itself, and a 5,000-person [protest flotilla](#) in the waters outside Belém, it is increasingly clear that many demanding climate justice have become alienated by the process itself.

These events extend beyond Belém; the ongoing COP boycott by the world’s arguably most well-known climate figure, Greta Thunberg, highlights the disconnect. Once celebrated by world leaders and the media alike, her increasingly confrontational approach towards the very structures that prevent radical action has put her at odds with key parties at COPs, highlighting the persistent gap between performative climate diplomacy and the realities facing communities.

Similar patterns of exclusion from climate governance are apparent when highlighting many of the world's most climate-affected populations. In a climate-sensitive Southeast Asia, this is strongly visible, where those [disproportionately affected](#) by climate change include rural farmers and ethnic minorities. For these communities, attending a COP30 at the mouth of the Amazon, multiple flights away and with high accommodation costs, is a near impossibility, while finding civil society actors who can accurately elevate their grievances may be equally difficult.

These difficulties may explain why only [17 per cent](#) of public climate adaptation finance reaches local communities, and why, in 2022, low-income countries received roughly one-tenth of reported [climate finance](#). Thus, to avoid the risk of reinforcing economic inequalities and placing climate funds in the wrong hands, connecting with the most climate-vulnerable populations remains an imperative.

The Growing Influence of COP Lobbyists

An additional factor in the stalling of the climate agenda stems from the growing role of COP “lobbyism”, particularly from the oil and gas sector. Lobbyist presence has [risen](#) substantially in the last decade, where the latest COPs have seen fossil fuel lobbyists [surpassing](#) the combined number of representatives from the world's ten most climate vulnerable countries, and doubling [Indigenous](#) people's representatives. At COP30, this trend continued, with over 1,600 fossil fuel [lobbyists](#) present, marking the largest proportional representation at a COP to date. Carrying financial and political leverage on states, the role of lobbyists has widely been regarded as further weakening climate action.

Due to its competing interests with progressive climate initiatives, the growing lobbyist COP influence has been described by critics as “having [arms dealers](#) run peace talks”. In peace studies, the term “spoilers” has been used for actors who intentionally undermine peace processes; at COP summits, a similar dynamic is visible. By granting spoilers influence, climate governance risks imprecise and incomplete action while reinforcing existing power asymmetries, ultimately at the expense of climate-vulnerable communities.

Rethinking the COP Framework

The traditional climate governance model, linked to sovereignty, national security, and maximised gains, exposes major shortcomings. Incorporating a human security approach represents a necessary amendment for COP to reconnect with human impacts.

Greater inclusivity remains critical. While parallel summits at COP30 have successfully brought together civil society, Indigenous actors, the private sector, academia, and other actors, on-the-ground experiences and knowledge still need to be translated into action. Encouraging states to include various community actors as part of their official delegations, potentially assisted through gender, socio-economic and Indigenous quotas, would enhance their influence in negotiations.

Inclusivity needs assistance by fostering greater accessibility. While colourful and symbolic host cities appear attractive, these endeavours may ultimately undermine the wider ambition if placed in unaffordable locations that themselves inflict environmental harm. Stricter hosting preconditions, or simply returning COP summits to an annual event at the UNFCCC headquarters in Bonn would help shift attention from symbolic performance to action.

Finally, increased attention towards COP lobbyism is critical. While the UN system centres around inclusivity, one must assess whether this principle legitimises participation from actors with disruptive intentions; a more productive agenda would have all participants work towards the original COP ambition. While this has raised risks of [alienating](#) the private sector or states altogether, the expanding role of green finance and reputational leverage in COP participation makes reducing spoiler influence a feasible target.

The increased emphasis on collective action at COP30 needs support at future summits through concrete steps that underscore that it is more than a performative platform. Only then can global climate governance regain traction and make critical advancements towards its original goal.

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