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# **COP30: An Inflection Point for Climate Action and Governance**

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and Climate

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# Abstract

The 30<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP30), opening in Belém, Brazil, on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2025, convenes at a perilous moment. Even as the climate crisis deepens – with 2024 confirmed as the hottest year on record, surpassing the 1.5°C threshold for the first time – climate action is slipping down the global political agenda due to geopolitical tensions, rising populism, economic pressures, and the United States (US) withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, which undermines the multilateral, rules-based order.

There has been progress since the Paris Agreement was reached ten years ago, including the deployment of renewable energy, with costs falling, and it is reasonable to hope that a peak in global emissions is close. However, the world is still far from the rapid and sustained reductions needed.

COP30 is not just another climate conference, it is a chance to reaffirm commitment to multilateral climate action despite significant headwinds.

Over thirty years, the COP has evolved from a technical meeting to a massive global event, with COP28 in Dubai attracting over 80 000 participants. This growth in participation is mainly driven by the development of the "action agenda" – the ecosystem of initiatives involving non-state actors like cities, businesses, and civil society alongside governments and international organisations.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process is now at an inflection point. With the Paris Agreement and its detailed rulebook fully operational, the era of grand negotiations is largely complete. The central task for Belém and future COPs is no longer about creating rules but about driving their implementation through cooperation and collaboration to help overcome the real-world barriers to action.

Belém's location in the Amazon is symbolically important, but it brings logistical challenges, especially an accommodation crisis with soaring prices. This poses a risk of exclusion for delegations from the poorest countries and civil society, undermining the inclusivity and legitimacy of the conference.

The formal negotiating agenda in Belém is busy with important technical work but lacks a single "big ticket" item. Key decisions are expected on establishing indicators to track progress on the global goal on adaptation, guiding the just transition work program, and several other issues. However, discussions on finance and the follow-up to the first global stocktake are expected to be contentious.

The biggest challenge for Belém is political: how to respond to the inadequate ambition of the new round of nationally determined contributions (NDCs) for 2035. Early indications, including an underwhelming announcement from China, suggest the collective ambition of these new climate targets will fall far short of a 1.5°C or even 2°C pathway. There is also a need to ensure a meaningful follow-up to last year's new financial goal and demonstrate a pathway to build up finance for developing countries despite cuts in support from developed countries.

The Brazilian presidency needs to find a result that galvanises the rest of the world. Several strategies are possible:

- **Political leadership:** the summit planned before the opening of the COP could be used to generate strong political messages and momentum from heads of State and government.
- **A traditional decision-led outcome:** the presidency could aim for a high-level political decision that urges all parties to "revisit and strengthen" their targets. Whilst important, that may be little more than rhetoric.
- **An implementation forum:** restructuring the "action agenda" around key themes from the global stocktake provides the opportunity to turn the focus on delivery and to put an implementation forum at the heart of the COP, coupled with a robust follow-up plan to track progress and ensure accountability.

An effective approach may combine all three strategies, using existing roadmaps on ambition and finance ("Mission 1.5" and the "Baku to Belém Roadmap") to drive progress, and the soft power of the COP to influence other international processes, such as the broader reform of the international financial architecture.

Internal disagreements and global instability have placed the EU's credibility under scrutiny. The EU must restore its credibility on ambition by submitting an NDC with the highest possible ambition and not watering down the European Green Deal. It also needs to secure climate finance, strengthen partnerships, and support the role of European actors beyond governments.

Belém can mark the beginning of a much-needed evolution of the COP process, shifting the focus to implementation, improving the effectiveness of the formal COP process, and building stronger links to the rest of the UN system.

# Résumé

La 30<sup>e</sup> Conférence des Parties (COP30), qui s'ouvrira à Belém, au Brésil, le 10 novembre 2025, se réunit à un moment périlleux. Alors même que la crise climatique s'aggrave – l'année 2024 ayant été confirmée comme l'année la plus chaude jamais enregistrée, dépassant pour la première fois le seuil de 1,5°C – l'action climatique recule dans l'agenda politique mondial en raison des tensions géopolitiques, de la montée du populisme, des pressions économiques et du retrait des États-Unis de l'accord de Paris, ce qui mine l'ordre multilatéral fondé sur des règles.

Des progrès ont été réalisés depuis l'adoption de l'accord de Paris il y a dix ans, notamment le déploiement des énergies renouvelables, dont les coûts ont chuté, et il est raisonnable d'espérer qu'un pic des émissions mondiales soit proche. Cependant, le monde reste encore loin des réductions rapides et soutenues nécessaires. La COP30 n'est pas une énième conférence sur le climat : c'est une occasion de réaffirmer l'engagement en faveur de l'action multilatérale pour le climat, malgré les vents contraires significatifs.

Au fil des trente ans passés, la COP s'est transformée d'une réunion technique en un événement mondial de grande ampleur, la COP28 à Dubaï ayant attiré plus de 80 000 participants. Cette croissance de la participation est principalement tirée par le développement de « l'agenda de l'action » – l'écosystème d'initiatives impliquant des acteurs non étatiques tels que les villes, les entreprises et la société civile, aux côtés des gouvernements et des organisations internationales.

Le processus de la convention-cadre des Nations unies sur les changements climatiques (CCNUCC) est désormais à un point d'inflexion. Avec l'accord de Paris et son corpus de règles détaillé pleinement opérationnel, l'ère des grandes négociations est largement achevée. La tâche centrale pour Belém et les futures COP n'est plus de créer des règles, mais d'accélérer leur mise en œuvre par la coopération et la collaboration afin d'aider à surmonter les obstacles concrets à l'action.

L'emplacement de Belém en Amazonie est symboliquement important, mais il soulève des défis logistiques, notamment une crise d'hébergement avec des prix en forte augmentation. Cela pose un risque d'exclusion pour les délégations des pays les plus pauvres et de la société civile, ce qui nuirait à l'inclusivité et à la légitimité de la Conférence.

L'agenda formel des négociations à Belém est chargé de travaux techniques importants, mais il lui manque le fait d'avoir un item « saillant ». Des décisions majeures sont attendues concernant

l'établissement d'indicateurs pour suivre les progrès sur l'objectif mondial en matière d'adaptation, l'orientation du programme de travail sur la transition juste et plusieurs autres questions. Cependant, les discussions sur le financement et le suivi du premier bilan global devraient être épineuses.

Le plus grand défi pour Belém est politique : comment répondre à l'ambition insuffisante de la nouvelle série de contributions déterminées au niveau national (CDN) pour 2035. Les premières indications, y compris une annonce décevante de la Chine, suggèrent que l'ambition collective de ces nouveaux objectifs climatiques sera loin d'être compatible avec une trajectoire de 1,5 °C. Il est également nécessaire d'assurer la poursuite substantielle du nouvel objectif financier fixé l'année dernière et de démontrer une feuille de route pour mobiliser le financement pour les pays en développement malgré les réductions de soutien de la part des pays développés.

La présidence brésilienne a besoin de dégager un résultat qui mobilise le reste du monde. Plusieurs stratégies sont possibles :

- **Le leadership politique** : le sommet prévu avant l'ouverture de la COP pourrait être utilisé pour générer des messages politiques forts et une dynamique auprès des chefs d'État et de gouvernement.
- **Un résultat axé sur une approche traditionnelle** : la présidence pourrait viser une décision politique de haut niveau qui exhorte toutes les Parties à « revoir et renforcer » leurs objectifs. Bien qu'importante, cela pourrait n'être guère plus que de la rhétorique.
- **Un forum de mise en œuvre** : restructurer « l'agenda de l'action » autour de thèmes clés issus du bilan global offre l'opportunité de mettre l'accent sur la concrétisation des ambitions et de placer un forum de mise en œuvre au cœur de la COP, couplé à un plan de suivi robuste pour assurer la traçabilité des progrès.

Une approche efficace pourrait combiner ces trois stratégies, en utilisant les feuilles de route existantes sur l'ambition et le financement (« Mission 1.5 » et la « Feuille de route de Bakou à Belém ») pour accélérer les progrès, et le pouvoir d'influence (ou *soft power*) de la COP pour impacter d'autres processus internationaux, tels que la réforme plus large de l'architecture financière internationale.

Les désaccords internes et l'instabilité mondiale ont mis la crédibilité de l'Union européenne (UE) sous la loupe. L'UE doit restaurer sa crédibilité en matière d'ambition en soumettant une CDN avec l'ambition la plus élevée possible et en ne diluant pas le Pacte vert (*Green Deal*) européen. Elle doit également garantir le financement climatique, renforcer les partenariats et soutenir le rôle des acteurs européens au-delà des gouvernements.

Belém peut marquer le début d'une évolution indispensable du processus de la COP, en déplaçant l'accent vers la mise en œuvre, en améliorant l'efficacité du processus formel de la COP et en bâtissant des liens plus solides avec le reste du système des Nations unies.



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# Introduction

## The context of COP30

The year 2024 saw the global average temperature reach a new high of 1.55°C above average preindustrial levels, the first time on record it has gone above the 1.5°C threshold.<sup>1</sup> Several estimates suggest that 2025 is on track to be the second or third warmest year. Going above 1.5°C in one single year does not mean that we have already left the Paris Agreement's temperature target behind, but it means that the world is dangerously close to doing so. Climate impacts including floods, droughts, extreme weather, tropical cyclones and wildfires are multiplying and being increasingly felt in countries around the world.

Meanwhile, global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue to rise, although there are some signs that we may finally be close to a peak – a 1% fall in China's GHG emissions in the first half of 2025 was a hopeful signal.<sup>2</sup> But until global emissions not only peak but also begin a rapid and sustained decline to net zero we will not see global temperatures start to stabilize. Even if we overshoot 1.5°C, it remains vital to get to net zero at a global level as soon as possible. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change explained, every fraction of a degree counts, every year counts, every action counts. There are significant differences between warming of 1.5°C, 2.0°C or 2.5°C.

But whilst the climate crisis is deepening, political attention is shifting to other priorities, and the commitment to climate action seems to be weakening. The most extreme case is in the United States (US), which, under President Trump, has announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and is rolling back climate and other environmental policies enacted by the previous administration. In exchange, they are actively promoting fossil fuels and using their leverage to encourage other countries, including Europe, to consume more American oil and gas. The rules-based trading system is being shredded by the US unilateralism. Geopolitical tensions, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, and tensions in Asia dominate the debate. Europe is rearming, and budgetary restrictions lead to reductions in other areas such as foreign aid. Other policies are increasingly seen through the lens of short-term industrial

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1. *State of Global Climate 2024*, World Meteorological Organization (WMO), March 25, available at: <https://wmo.int>.

2. L. Myllyvirta "Analysis: Record Solar Growth Keeps China's CO<sub>2</sub> Falling in First Half of 2025", *Carbon Brief*, August 21, 2025, available at: [www.carbonbrief.org](http://www.carbonbrief.org).

competitiveness, raising a particular challenge for climate policy that requires a longer-term vision and active policies to accompany the transition to a decarbonized future. The voices of innovators, preparing to succeed in the economy of tomorrow, are drowned out by the concerns of established firms, worried about the future of their traditional models. In Europe, there is a temptation to unpick or delay key elements of the Green Deal. Populism is rising, driven by online misinformation that makes it harder to have rational debates on key policy choices.

That is the background to COP30 which will open in Belém, Brazil on November 10, 2025. But that should not be a reason for despair, rather it means that Belém is a chance that must be seized – a chance to show that the climate crisis remains at the top of the global agenda despite the many other pressing concerns, a chance to prove that countries of the world remain committed to multilateralism despite the defection of the US, and a chance to demonstrate that climate action can be positive for development, for jobs, for competitiveness.

# The evolving COP: from negotiation to implementation

The “COP” is the Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is the governing body of the UNFCCC, the forum for the governments of countries that have ratified it – the “parties” – to oversee its implementation, to give guidance, and to take any other action that they deem necessary to strengthen climate action. Two closely related bodies meet at the same time: the COP serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol (CMP) and the COP serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Paris Agreement (CMA) are the governing bodies of their respective treaties. Although these three bodies, the COP, CMP and CMA, are legally distinct and there are some differences in participation, they operate under the same rules: except where it is important to strictly distinguish between them, this note will use the term COP loosely to refer to all three governing bodies.

Much of the work of the governing bodies is prepared by the two subsidiary bodies for scientific and technological advice (SBSTA) and implementation (SBI). These two bodies meet twice a year, first for two weeks in Bonn in June, then during the first week of the COP to finalize most of the draft decisions for adoption at the closing of the conference.

Over 30 years, the UNFCCC process has achieved a great deal. It has put an international spotlight on climate change and climate action, obliging countries to recognize the challenge and explain what they are doing, provided a framework for collaboration, developed two specific treaties to enable that to go further, implemented tools for reporting, sharing experiences and learning, and promoting means to support action in developing countries. The focus and the role of the COP have evolved over the years, as has the participation.

## From Rio to Kyoto to Paris

The UNFCCC was a product of the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – one of the three Rio Conventions along with the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification.

It was quickly realized that there was a need for a more operational agreement to strengthen implementation. That led to the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, with absolute emissions reduction targets for developed countries. Despite high hopes, the Kyoto Protocol did not fully

deliver, not least due to the refusal of the US to take part, and it proved not to be a model that could be expanded to include developing countries. Despite those limitations, it did strengthen the climate action of developed countries during its two commitment periods (2008-12 and 2013-20) and mobilized significant resources to support action in developing countries through the clean development mechanism.

Attempts to develop a broader framework than Kyoto failed in Copenhagen in 2009 but still led to strengthened action in the period up to 2020 through the set of decisions agreed the following year in Cancún. Above all, it set the scene for the adoption of the Paris Agreement at COP21 in 2015.

The Paris Agreement has now taken centre-stage as the principal tool for strengthening the implementation of the UNFCCC. In the decade since its adoption, the COP (strictly the CMA) has agreed the detailed rulebook for the application of the Paris Agreement, has conducted the first global stocktake in Dubai in 2023, and has taken a number of important complementary decisions on topics such as the creation of the fund for responding to loss and damage, and fixing a new, collective, quantified financial goal. As a result, the Paris Agreement is now fully operational. The dynamic between its different elements – the shared goals, especially the temperature goal, the bottom-up NDCs, the common rules and processes that feed back to ensure the credibility of the process, and the facilitation of cooperation and collaboration – together interact to drive the ambition mechanism that is intended to help the world face the climate crisis.

## **Ten years of the Paris Agreement have made a difference – but there remain major gaps**

Before the Paris Agreement was agreed in 2015, projections suggested the world was on a pathway to up to 4°C of warming. Estimates from 2024 (before the submission of the latest nationally determined contributions) suggested that existing mitigation targets could potentially limit the temperature increase to between 2.1-2.8°C. However, it is not enough to fix targets, what matters is implementation and there is an “implementation gap” as well as an “ambition gap.” It is too early (at the time of writing) to say how far the current round of updated NDCs will shift the cursor, but the indications are that many remain too weak to put us on a pathway to 2°C, let alone 1.5°C.

Many parties have developed long-term low GHG emission development strategies including targets to reach net-zero emissions by the middle of the century or shortly thereafter. If those targets were fully implemented, they might make it possible to keep temperatures below 2°C – but most nationally

determined contributions are not yet aligned with those longer-term pathways, and existing policies will not be sufficient to get there.

In parallel, the real economy has been changing. In particular, the costs of many key technologies, including solar photovoltaic, batteries and electric vehicles, have fallen dramatically. Governments have also been putting in place the institutions, legal and administrative frameworks that are required to develop and implement policies to control GHG emissions and address the impacts of climate change, including through adaptation. Business has been identifying the opportunities of a low-carbon and resilient future.

The glass is half full. The glass is also half empty. Despite real progress, global GHG emissions have yet to begin the rapid and sustained reductions that are necessary to get to net zero by the middle of this century. Global temperatures in 2024 exceeded 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels for the first time, and the impacts of climate change are being felt everywhere. The levels of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere soared by a record amount to new highs in 2024 due to continued emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> from human activities and an upsurge from wildfires, but raising concerns that terrestrial and ocean CO<sub>2</sub> sinks may be becoming less effective, increasing the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> that stays in the atmosphere and thereby accelerating global warming.<sup>3</sup>

Although there has been progress in mobilizing increased finance for climate action, it remains insufficient, and too little investment is getting to developing countries outside China: access to adequate, affordable and predictable finance remains a huge challenge for many countries.

The decision of the US to leave the Paris Agreement for a second time is regrettable and will clearly slow down, and possibly reverse, the transition in the US. For the moment, no other country has followed them and there remains strong support for the Paris Agreement around the world. However, the absence of the US may lead others to weaken their ambition in the short term, especially as the US uses its influence to promote exports of American fossil fuels and protect the interests of its industry.

## A growing and increasingly diverse participation

The UNFCCC is a universal treaty with 198 parties, more than the membership of the UN General Assembly (the difference is accounted for by the presence of several countries that are not full members of the UN, including Palestine and the Holy See, several Pacific islands, and the European Union which is a party in its own right in addition to the 27 EU

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3. WMO Greenhouse Gas Bulletin No. 21, World Meteorological Organization, October 16, 2025, available at: <https://wmo.int>.

member states). Almost all parties to the UNFCCC are also parties to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, although some remain outside (including of course the US).

The COP began as a fairly small affair: at the first session in Berlin in 1995, presided by then German environment minister Angela Merkel, there were less than a thousand government delegates, a similar number from observer organizations, and two thousand accredited journalists. The COP has met every year since then, with the exception of the pandemic year 2020, and boosted by a number of high-profile meetings such as Kyoto in 1997, Copenhagen in 2009, and Paris in 2015 has steadily gained in visibility, political importance and participation. As a result, what began as a rather technical event has been transformed into a major global political event: over 80,000 participants were present at COP28 in Dubai in 2023, whilst more than 50,000 people were present at COP29 in Baku last year.

Recent COPs have seen the presence of many heads of State and government. Summits have taken place at each of the most recent conferences, with over 150 leaders present in Dubai in 2023.

This massive growth in the size of recent COPs is largely down to the increased importance of the action agenda – the informal spaces alongside the formal COP process, bringing together countries, intergovernmental organizations, but also non-state actors such as cities and subnational governments, business and different components of civil society.

This growth in participation is both a sign of health – the COP is the place to be for those acting on climate change, to network, forge links, do deals – and a source of criticism – the process has become a wandering circus, attracting more and more participants, whilst the results are far from what is needed in the light of the science.

# Four key challenges for Belém

## The logistical challenge – the choice of Belém

The decision to host COP30 in Belém was a political choice by President Lula, to bring the COP to the Amazon where the impacts of climate change are already visible, where the challenges of climate action and the future of the Amazon rain forest are immediate. However, the limited number of hotel beds in the city compared to the expected number of participants has led to soaring hotel prices. As a result, some delegations have indicated that they may need to cut the size of their teams in Belém, some have even suggested that they may not be able to be present. The challenge is particularly acute for representatives of the poorest and most vulnerable countries, some of whom pushed for the conference to be moved to another city – a proposal that was rejected.

After several conferences in countries that had many restrictions in place on the action of civil society, NGOs have great expectations for the COP in Brazil. As a result, they also are deeply concerned about the costs of participation and the possible consequences for the inclusivity of the conference.

At one level, complaints about logistics of COPs are recurrent – some delegates to COP24 in Katowice were staying over 75 km away in Krakow, many delegates to COP26 in Glasgow had to stay outside the city, some as far away as Edinburgh. The challenges in Belém do, however, seem to be more severe than in the past, not least because of the lack of nearby alternative places to stay.

The Brazilian government is working hard to ensure that the conference goes smoothly, that accommodation is available (rooms in homes, cruise ships...) and that prices remain reasonable for all delegates. Allowances for some developing country participants have been increased. Some preparatory events, including meetings bringing together business and local governments, will take place in other cities in Brazil. There remains a risk, however, that logistical challenges may continue to overshadow the event and impact its legitimacy.



## The core political challenge – the lack of ambition on mitigation, adaptation and finance

In the absence of a “big ticket” item, the formal results of the COP are not going to be sufficient to provide the political response needed in the face of the geopolitical context, the attacks on multilateralism, the weakness of the latest round of nationally determined contributions, the limited action on adaptation, and the challenge of mobilizing finance for climate action in a world where traditional North-South funding is too little and even falling.

It is deeply worrying that the ambition of the latest round of NDCs appears to be far too weak. At the time of writing, 62 updated NDCs with new targets out to 2035 have been received by the UNFCCC secretariat.<sup>4</sup> It is hoped that more will be received before the opening of the COP, including those promised at the summit organised by Brazil and the UN Secretary General a few weeks ago. It is particularly important that NDCs of all members of the G20 be forthcoming – they are not only the worlds’ biggest economies they are also the biggest emitters and their choices are critical.

The US under the Trump administration is not going to be part of the collective effort. The role of China is therefore key, and it has flagged its strong support for the Paris Agreement with President Xi announcing the main details of its 2035 NDC, including for the first time an absolute emissions reduction target for China. However, despite the political importance of that announcement, the substance is disappointing, the targets of 7% to 10% emissions reduction by 2035 from peak levels has been assessed as “constrained ambition” – China has opted for promising no more than it is confident it can deliver. Unfortunately, they are not ambitious enough to meet the Paris Agreement’s temperature goals or to galvanize the international community to accelerate climate progress.”<sup>5</sup>

The EU’s hesitation is a cause for concern. It was unable to present an NDC for 2035 at the UN summit, instead providing a “statement of intent” that the EU is expected to submit an NDC ahead of COP30 with an indicative 2035 target in a range between 66.25% and 72.5% reductions from 1990 levels. Discussion continues, including on whether to confirm the proposed 90% reduction target for 2040, with pressure to water it down with consequences for the credibility of the EU in the multilateral space.

The UNFCCC secretariat’s synthesis report will be available ahead of the COP, there should also be the latest 2025 UNEP Emissions Gap Report,

4. According to the UNFCCC website accessed 17 October 2025, available at: <https://unfccc.int>.

5. K Logan and Li Shuo, “Unpacking China’s New Headline Climate Targets”, Asia Society, September 2025, available at: <https://asiasociety.org>.

and they should start to reply to those questions. However, everything suggests that a considerable ambition gap will remain.

In addition to the lack of mitigation action, too few countries have submitted their national adaptation plans or adaptation communications.

Underlying this are deep concerns about the limits of climate finance, above all the finance available for developing countries. The new collective quantified goal agreed in Baku last year is for 2035, but there is a shortfall in the short-term, and concerns that cuts in developed countries' aid budgets will make that worse, adding to the trust deficit in the process too.

There are high expectations for Belém to provide a response to these shortfalls, and set out ways to strengthen mitigation, adaptation and finance action.

## **The “elephant not in the room” challenge – navigating the US absence and attacks on multilateralism**

President Trump signed an executive order on the first day of his return to office to take the US out of the Paris Agreement, for a second time. Whilst the terms of the Paris Agreement require a year before withdrawal is legally effective, that does not seem to concern the US and they are acting as if they are already no longer a party.

The US have not indicated any intention to withdraw from the UNFCCC and given that it was ratified with the approval of the US Senate in 1992, not just by a presidential executive order, there may be constitutional constraints that would make it more difficult for the US to withdraw. However, despite remaining a party to the UNFCCC, the US seems to be treating that as something that no longer binds them: they are not paying their share of the UNFCCC budget (Mike Bloomberg has offered to make up the shortfall), and they did not even send a delegation to the June session of the subsidiary bodies in Bonn. Whether the US send a delegation to Belém is not yet clear, but if they do take part, the Brazilian presidency may need to find a way to ensure that a party that makes no effort to participate constructively in the decision-making process cannot simply block consensus and stop others from making progress.

Even if the US does not trouble the formal COP process, their absence sends a powerful negative signal. And the US are also using their unilateral initiatives to undermine multilateral action on climate, including through their trade “deals” some of which also seek to encourage the purchase and use of US oil and gas or to weaken other countries' environmental and climate rules that bind US business operating in those jurisdictions.

In the end, COP30 cannot allow itself to be determined by the US presence or absence but needs to send a strong message about the determination and continued commitment to multilateralism and climate action of the rest of the world community.

## **The transformation challenge – successfully making the shift from negotiation to implementation**

After three decades, the UNFCCC process is at a clear inflection point. With the Paris Agreement and its rulebook now fully operational, the era of grand negotiations is largely complete. The COP remains vital to driving global action on climate change, but the central task for Belém and beyond is no longer creating rules but driving their implementation through cooperation and collaboration. That need for renewal and reinvention will run through all the responses that need to be found in Belém, and mark out the way forward for the COP.

# Getting maximum impact from the results of Belém

COP30 in Belém will take place in a geopolitical context that is favorable neither to multilateralism nor to climate action. The Brazilian COP30 presidency has its work cut out and will need to make full use of their experienced team, the political leverage of their membership of many groups (G20, BRICS, BASIC, G77...), their extensive diplomatic network, the mobilization of the whole of government, their links to civil society and broader mobilization to make Belém the success that the world needs.

## The management of the formal agenda – the traditional heart of the COP

The formal intergovernmental work of the COP – the issues that are on the agendas of the governing and subsidiary bodies – is the traditional heart of what the COP does, often referred to as the “climate negotiations”. Many of these tracks will require the adoption of decisions by one or several of the governing bodies on the way forward, the work of the UNFCCC secretariat, invitations to parties and other organizations to take specific actions, and next steps. Decisions are usually prepared by the two subsidiary bodies, both during the June session and the first week of the COP. Some issues, notably related to finance, are negotiated directly under the governing bodies. Decisions are taken by consensus of the parties.

The bulk of the negotiations on the implementation of the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement have been completed in the past few years. That does not mean that there are no further negotiations to be undertaken – on the contrary, the agendas for COP30 are very busy and there are important results to deliver. However, these decisions to be agreed in Belém are mainly about ongoing monitoring of work, oversight of the work of various technical bodies, reviews of existing guidelines, and a number of other decisions on relatively technical issues. There are no “big ticket” items like the global stocktake in Dubai or the new collective quantified goal on finance in Baku.

Some of the more significant expected outcomes include decisions on the following topics.

- A set of indicators to track progress to the global goal of adaptation and help improve the assessment of overall action on adaptation. There remain some technical issues to be resolved, not least to bring the list of indicators down to a manageable number.

- The next steps for the just transition work program that was launched three years ago. The main disagreements concern how far to go beyond the sharing of experience on the just transition of the workforce at a national level, and how far it should seek to be a more operational program to provide technical or other assistance to developing countries.
- The way forward on next global stocktake. There could be a first decision that would identify ways to improve the process for the second stocktake in 2028. There are strongly divergent views on another decision related to the UAE dialogue (as a follow up to the first stocktake from 2023), with differences especially around how far there should be a focus on finance. This may prove one of the more contentious issues of the conference.
- The mitigation work programs has often produced limited results in the past years, despite efforts by some parties to get stronger messages on what stronger mitigation action could mean and how it could be made possible.
- There will be several decisions on finance. Many are largely procedural, ongoing oversight of existing funds and bodies. One of the trickier items may be regarding article 2.1(c) of the Paris Agreement on making financial flows consistent with the objectives of low emissions and resilient development. The question of how developed countries are meeting their commitments to increase financial support will also be one of the fault lines of the conference. There will be an interaction between the formal decisions on finance, and the more political outcomes to take forward the mobilization of climate finance.
- The rules for market mechanisms under article 6 of the Paris Agreement have now been finalized so the focus will shift to taking them forward, including how to respond to any recommendations and further guidance to article 6.4 mechanism.
- An increase of around 10% to the budget of the UNFCCC for 2026-2027 was agreed at the June session. The decision is due to be formally adopted at the COP.

Before work can formally begin, the COP and the other governing and subsidiary bodies need to agree the draft agendas that the secretariat has prepared. There are a few items proposed by some parties which may create difficulties for other parties, including:

- Unilateral trade measures, an issue regularly raised in recent years by developing countries, in particular in relation to the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism. (Of course, there is another much more crucial unilateral threat to the rule-based trading system, but that is not the target of this proposed agenda item.)

- The provision of finance by developed countries, a particularly sensitive item given the cuts to the financial support provided by many of these countries to developing states. This will already be picked up under existing finance items, but some developing countries propose a separate agenda item to put a spotlight on the question.
- African countries have long requested recognition of their special circumstances, but that runs into strong opposition from developing countries in other regions such as Latin America who consider that the Paris Agreement should not single out a geographical area.

The Brazilian presidency and the chairs of the subsidiary bodies will need to consult widely before the opening of the conference to find a consensus way forward and avoid any delays at the opening of the COP. The most likely way forward would be for the presidency to undertake informal consultations on controversial topics to see if there is a possible way to address them. They may also try to provide other spaces to consider them, as Brazil is hoping to do with a dialogue on climate change and trade policy under the action agenda.

It is urgent to get agreement on the host country for COP31 in 2026. Australia and Türkiye have both offered to host the COP. Still, there is no agreement yet on which candidature should go forward, and the clock is ticking down to allow whichever country is selected to start preparations. It would be desirable to get clear indications of the possible hosts of COP32 in 2027 which should take place in Africa (there are suggestions Nigeria might be interested) and COP33 in 2028 in Asia (India has several times indicated their interest). That would allow successive COP presidencies to begin cooperating.

## **Potential strategies for the COP30 presidency to respond to the political challenge**

In the absence of “big ticket” results from the formal agendas, the COP30 presidency will need to construct a political response to the lack of ambition and delivery on mitigation, adaptation and finance and to counter the US absence and to reaffirm the centrality of multilateralism. They have various options open to them, but these are not mutually exclusive, so they may in practice choose to pursue some combination of them, using a focused, political decision and leaders’ calls for action to bolster a robust, forward-looking implementation plan that is then followed up throughout 2026.

## ***Leverage political leadership from heads of State and government***

Brazil will host a summit of heads of State and government on November 6-7, a few days ahead of the formal opening of COP30. The political messages and statements of leaders during the summit could serve to create greater momentum to raise the collective level of action and ambition.

One option might be to develop an agreed political declaration – but that would require considerable preparation by sherpas ahead of the summit and would likely turn into a complicated negotiation process. A more flexible approach might be a summary of the summit by Brazil as the COP presidency – it would not bind the participants, but it would provide a strong political tool that could be used both by the COP president and by President Lula himself in his bilateral dealings.

## ***Develop a traditional decision-led outcome***

This is the default way that the UNFCCC process has traditionally worked. The experience of the UK at COP26 in Glasgow in 2021 might provide a precedent. The COP26 decision, *inter alia*:

“... noted with serious concern the findings of the synthesis report [on NDCs that the expected pathway was too high] (...) emphasized the urgent need for parties to increase their efforts to collectively reduce emissions (...) urged parties that had not already communicated their latest NDC to do so as soon as possible, ... requested parties to revisit and strengthen their targets to align with the Paris Agreement temperature goal, taking into account different national circumstances.”

In addition, it set up a work programs and decided to hold an annual high-level ministerial round table.

A decision from Belém could do something similar. It could also refer to the decision on the global stocktake from Dubai in 2023 that invited parties to consider how they might contribute to a series of collective efforts in their revised NDCs, including tripling renewables, doubling energy efficiency, and transitioning away from fossil fuels.

There are downsides to seeking such a decision. First, there is no formal agenda item on the question – the logic of the Paris Agreement was to leave the assessment of the collective ambition of NDCs to the global stocktake process, not an ad hoc process in the year of their submission. Past presidencies have found ways round that, but usually by opening out the decision to address a wide range of topics – turning it into a “cover decision” as in Glasgow or Sharm El Sheikh the following year. Whilst that approach has some merit, it can end up multiplying the issues in play, encouraging parties to raise the stakes on other issues, making it harder to manage the negotiating process, especially in the final days.



However, the biggest problem with seeking such a decision might be whether it would make any substantial difference in the real world. The decision from Glasgow sent a valuable signal, it provided a good headline for the closing of COP26, but it was not truly operational and did not lead to many parties revising their targets. There is therefore a risk that seeking a formal decision in Belém might end up as little more than feel-good posturing – especially if defended by ministers in the conference whilst their governments at home remained reluctant to raise the ambition of their own NDCs.

### ***Put an implementation forum at the heart of the COP to strengthen action and delivery***

Belém can serve as a pivot to implementation. That can and should be part of the political response.

The action agenda is a support that could be used by the presidency to propose a more operational way forward, mobilizing concrete cooperation and collaboration rather than rhetoric. The existing action agenda has been developed over the past decade by successive presidencies with the assistance of the high-level climate champions. Many interesting and valuable initiatives have been launched – several hundred in total. It has the great advantage of being able to associate not only countries, but non-state actors such as business, local government and civil society directly. And since it does not need all parties to join all initiatives, it does not rely on reaching consensus to move forward. But it also has weaknesses, in particular there has been no underlying strategy, presidencies have not built on what their predecessors had done and have rarely committed the resources to ensure an adequate follow up. The result is a process that has not delivered at its potential.

The incoming COP30 presidency has already restructured the action agenda around six main themes derived from the outcome of the first global stocktake: transitioning energy, industry and transport; stewarding forests, oceans and biodiversity; transforming agriculture and food systems; building resilience for cities, infrastructure and water; fostering human and social development; and a cross-cutting theme of unleashing enablers and accelerators, including on finance, technology and capacity building. Each of these is further broken down into a number of key objectives.<sup>6</sup>

This is a promising approach with the potential to bring together many strands from both the action agenda and the formal COP process that are needed to support parties in overcoming barriers and challenges through action. The presidency will provide space throughout the conference to show how existing initiatives are moving forward, where they can be

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6. Fourth Letter from the COP30 Presidency, June 20, 2025, available at: <https://cop30.br>.



strengthened, and in some cases where they may need to be complemented by further initiatives.

The work that the Brazilian presidency has already undertaken provides the basis to take a major step towards turning the COP into a genuine implementation forum to support climate action. Indeed, that focus on implementation might ultimately prove to be a stronger outcome from Belém than yet another decision, especially if the presidency then brought all that information together at the end of the conference in the form of an implementation plan for the year ahead, setting out how progress would be followed up throughout the following year, with a timeline for delivery, and regular review points throughout the year, for example during climate weeks, in New York, etc., and how they will work with the high level champions and the next presidency (or even better, presidencies) in the lead up to the next COP. Such an implementation plan would need to clarify who is responsible for following up on each initiative – a name against each box in the implementation plan. Ensuring that there is reporting on pledges and announcements by non-party stakeholders, including business and other actors, would provide credibility, avoid the risk of greenwashing, and contribute to the overall impact of action.

The implementation forum could also offer a platform to address specific actions that can make a real contribution to tackling the climate challenge. A particularly important one is to slash methane emissions, especially from the energy sector. Not only can that be a win-win approach, but it can deliver dramatic benefits for the climate since methane is a short-lived gas that makes an outsized contribution to global warming: targeted actions can make a major contribution to limiting warming in the years ahead. There are interesting proposals, including from the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, to think about a new legal framework for tackling methane. That might be a way forward, but it would face many hurdles, and anchoring strong action already in the action agenda could probably achieve similar results without having to wait for a further round of negotiations.

A further advantage of focusing on implementation, rather than seeking a decision, is that it can be communicated in plain, everyday language, rather than “UNFCCC speak,” making clear the links to development, prosperity, and wider sustainable development challenges and bridging some of the gaps to citizens.

### ***Make full use of other initiatives run by the COP presidency***

The Roadmap to Mission 1.5 was launched in Dubai as a process managed by the “troika” of the UAE, Azeri and Brazilian presidencies to drive higher mitigation ambition. It has been moved forward over the past two years by consulting parties, non-state actors, international organizations, and many

others. Its strength comes in part from the fact that it has not been a negotiating process, it has not been seeking consensus outcomes, but instead has been about mobilization, enhancing international cooperation and the international enabling environment to stimulate ambition, enhance ambition and implementation. There would be merit in taking forward Mission 1.5, continuing to work across several successive presidencies with the support of the champions. It would provide a complementary political track to accompany the implementation forum and plan outlined above and drive action moving forward.

The Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T was launched last year as part of the agreement on the new collective quantified goal on finance, aimed at scaling up climate finance for developing countries to support low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development pathways and implement the nationally determined contributions and national adaptation plans. Like Mission 1.5, this is not a negotiating process. The COP29 and COP30 presidencies will report on progress in Belém. This also has the potential to continue to serve as the vehicle to mobilize finance from many sources moving forward, leveraging the soft power of the COP to influence broader reform of the international financial system, in conjunction with the inputs from the circle of finance ministers, below.

The COP30 presidency can further call upon the initiatives it launched earlier this year to help prepare Belém which can now be woven into the overall political outcomes of the COP. These include:

- The circle of finance ministers chaired by the Brazilian Finance Minister. Reforming the financial system to address climate change requires action by the financial community – that means that finance ministers have to be brought into the center of the process.<sup>7</sup>
- The circle of COP presidents, chaired by COP21 president Laurent Fabius, can feed in its experience, but also advise on how to make a successful conference and reform the process moving forwards.
- The ethical stocktake is particularly innovative, bringing a spotlight on why we are not doing what is needed to address climate change, and is involving social, cultural, spiritual, business, scientific, and political leaders.
- The peoples circle makes the link back to people and communities, to ensure that traditional knowledge is respected and integrated into the international debate regarding climate issues and their solutions.

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7. “Report of the COP30 Circle of Finance Ministers launched during IMF and World Bank Meetings”, October 15, 2025, available at: <https://cop30.br>.

### ***Make full use of Brazil's diplomatic leverage with key partners***

In addition to its role as presidency of COP30, Brazil is a leading member of several groups of countries from the Global South, and it could use its diplomatic leverage to build support for stronger outcomes in Belém.

In particular, Brazil holds the chair this year of the BRICS group of countries that includes many of the largest emerging economies. It would be a strong signal for the success of COP30 were Brazil able to persuade these countries to step up and take a leadership role in Belém, for example by agreeing to accelerate the phase down of coal in their energy mix. Such an action would stand in stark contrast to the departure of the US and mark clearly the changing nature of global governance.

# Europe and the COP30 Challenge

The EU has traditionally prided itself on being a global climate leader, forging alliances with ambitious parties, such as small island states, and playing a key role in driving the multilateral climate process forward over the years. The European Green Deal translated this rhetoric into concrete legislation and action. Furthermore, the EU and its Member states remain the largest collective contributors to climate finance for developing countries.

However, recent internal debates and a radically shifting global landscape have placed the EU's credibility under intense scrutiny ahead of COP30 in Belém. The EU must navigate an era defined by internal policy tensions and external geopolitical instability, including the hostility of the United States. To reaffirm its leadership, Europe needs to focus on restoring ambition, securing climate finance, and strengthening partnerships. But it can also count on the role of European actors beyond the EU and national governments.

## Restoring ambition

The primary challenge to the EU's leadership lies in its own ambition and implementation gap. Its position is above all undermined by still unresolved internal debates regarding the 2040 emissions reduction target. At the summit hosted by Brazil and the UN Secretary General in September, the EU was unable to present its revised NDC for 2035, offering only a "statement of intent" indicating an indicative reduction range of 66.25% to 72.5% from 1990 levels that remains to be confirmed.<sup>8</sup>

The EU must move beyond political statements, avoid ambiguity and demonstrate strong resolve and to do this it needs to finalize and submit a high-ambition 2035 NDC as a clear signal to the world, and to actors within the EU, putting pressure on other major emitters to raise their ambition. This means maintaining its ambition for 2040 and setting the highest possible targets for 2035, prioritizing long-term competitiveness and the success of the EU in the economy of the future over slowing down or weakening efforts due to protective lobbying. The Green Deal has given the EU the basis to credibly demonstrate that ambitious targets are backed by achievable policies: to maintain the credibility the EU needs to avoid any further watering down of its ambition and substance.

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8. See more details at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu>.

## Securing climate finance

Maintaining the credibility of the EU on climate finance is a major challenge, particularly amidst current budget pressures. To do so will require demonstrating that the EU and its Member states will not lessen their commitment to scaling up climate finance over the coming decade to meet the targets set by the Baku decision on the new collective quantified goal on finance to at least 300 billion USD annually by 2035.

It has other levers that it can also use. Exerting its influence in the multilateral development institutions to contribute to increasing finance for climate mitigation and adaptation, and more broadly pushing for the reform of the global financial system. Article 2.1(c) of the Paris Agreement also provides an opportunity, not to justify phasing down traditional public finance, but in a complementary way to push for all financial flows to be consistent with low-emission, climate-resilient development. Finally, the EU can explore the potential of innovative finance such climate levies to provide additional financial sources for climate action, including to enable support for loss and damage.

## Strengthening partnerships

The active hostility to climate action of the US under the Trump administration is a profound threat to the multilateral, rules-based order, a threat that goes well beyond climate. The US is not only rolling back its own policies but is also actively promoting fossil fuels and undermining international trade rules.

The EU must position itself as the defender of the multilateral system. Already, working with Brazil and others to ensure the success of COP30 will be an important step. But this also means standing up to bilateral pressure from the US to weaken its climate and other environmental policies – a pressure that is only likely to grow. If the EU is seen as “selling out” its principles, it will lose its broader credibility and undermine the system even further.

The EU will need to re-evaluate its positioning in the world and how to get the maximum benefits for climate action and European interests out its partnerships, notably with China, India, Brazil, Latin America, and Africa. This may sometimes create tensions with other political goals, especially with China where there is a fine line between cooperation and competition. But if the EU does not exploit the potential for partnership – both to overcome some of those bilateral tensions (a key issue for future climate industrial policies and their interaction with the trade system) but also to build partnerships with third countries (especially in Africa) – then it will be closing many avenues to delivering leadership and climate action.

## Empowering non-state actors

Europe is not just the EU and the governments of the Member states. It is also the vast range of actors at different levels: parliamentarians, cities and subnational governments, business, the finance sector, civil society, research and youth movements. The action agenda provides a perfect opportunity for these diverse European players to engage directly in driving action, in Belém and in the years ahead, helping to maintain Europe's ambition and credibility in the world.

The EU and European governments can work to facilitate the presence of European actors in the action agenda initiatives, as well as in bilateral cooperation with non-state actors in other countries, so as to make the most of these opportunities, including through mobilizing their diplomatic systems in support.

# Some options for the future of the COP

It is clear that change is needed to make the COP more effective and more responsive to future needs that are no longer about negotiating a global treaty and much more about how to strengthen its implementation. This section briefly explores several options for improving the COP process, a debate that will no doubt continue following Belém, but to which it can be given a push there, especially if there is a real pivot towards implementation.

## Put an implementation forum at the heart of the COP

This idea has been set out in the previous section considering how to better structure the outputs of the action agenda and use it as a more operational response to the challenges faced by COP30. If each COP presidency were to organize such an implementation forum during each COP, working with the support of the champions, and then driving it forward across successive presidencies, it would become a powerful process to help drive climate action on mitigation, adaptation, loss and damage, and to mobilize and transform climate finance.

## Broaden participation and put implementers at the center of the COP process

Participation in the COP has changed over the years, but there is a growing need to find effective ways to bring “implementers” directly into the process, representatives of technical ministries that are responsible for implementation of climate mitigation and adaptation policies, rather than generalist diplomats, experts from other organizations and structures on the ground. Bringing more people to the COP of course has a cost, and there are legitimate questions already about the size of these events, but that should not be an argument for the *status quo*.

One way might be to make more and better use of virtual formats to make it easier for national experts to take part in events – for example to present national policies, to dialogue, to share and learn from experiences. There are of course challenges in managing time zones, but so long as those are taken into account, this can be an effective way to move things forward.

Another way might be to make better use of regional weeks, decentralizing away from the logic of one big annual COP to make use of several events throughout the year. Where these are held in different regions, this may make it easier and more attractive for experts from national capitals to take part.

Many groups of non-state actors are looking for ways to contribute more systematically to the work of the COP. Cities and subnational governments have in particular been exploring ways to be better represented, including a possible work programs. The shift to implementation may itself provide a natural way to bring these actors, as well as business and civil society into the heart of the process – no longer through the traditional formal agendas, but through the action process.

## **Rationalize the agendas**

Whilst the process will increasingly be focused on implementation, the traditional work of the subsidiary and governing bodies will remain vital – it is the legal function of the whole UNFCCC process. But that formal process is overloaded and getting harder to manage. Even though the work of negotiating the Paris Agreement itself and its rulebook is now behind us, the number of agenda items that need to be addressed at each session has continued to grow. As a result, it is no longer possible to give enough time to all items to do them justice – just finding enough rooms to hold the meetings, and good facilitators to run the discussion is a challenge.

The idea of rationalizing the agenda has been raised many times and usually runs into the trap of trying to decide which issues to continue discussing, which should not be taken up. But since all parties have their priorities, you soon get a situation where every item is a priority for someone, so everything has to be addressed.

One way forward might be to move towards a pluriannual work programs. This would not involve dropping any items but would enable work to be planned more rationally over several sessions – and hence allow more time to be allotted to that consideration, hopefully enabling better outcomes.

Another option that has been raised is the possibility to shift from an annual to a biannual meeting of the COP, but this proposal has not so far gained much traction.

## **Make better use of work programs, expert groups and other processes**

Linked to that might be a fresh look at the way that the work of the many constituted bodies (expert groups) and work programs is used. These are complex processes that are intended to bring together experts and provide a



focus on specific issues or challenges. At the moment, each process results in an annual report considered by the subsidiary bodies, and the governing bodies often make additional decisions each year. This is not very efficient and does not necessarily do justice to the valuable information that these bodies and programs are generating. It might be more appropriate to consider their outputs in the formal process only every few years, perhaps in conjunction with the reviews that are already planned every three or four years. That would also fit in well with the pluriannual approach presented above.

In between reviews, the work would continue, but without requiring the negotiation of further decisions unless the circumstances changed considerably. The counterpart would be finding better ways to use the information and experiences. Taking that into a more implementation-focused forum would be one approach – less negotiation, more use of the outputs.

## **Living with consensus decision-making**

A regular criticism of the COP process is that all decisions have to be reached by consensus. That is not the same things as unanimity, it does not require all parties to positively agree all the outcomes, but it does mean that no party should be actively opposing adoption. The key problem is that agreeing a voting rule in the rules of procedure requires consensus – and that has been lacking since COP1 in 1995.

Although the need for consensus has given a lever to countries like Saudi Arabia which have used it to block more ambitious outcomes, it has also been used by other groups like small island states to ensure that their concerns are not neglected either: for example, the inclusion of 1.5°C in the Paris Agreement temperature goal was far from guaranteed but the pressure of the most vulnerable forced it onto the negotiating table. It has also avoided giving countries the excuse to slam the door and leave the UNFCCC process. So, whilst there are reasons to regret the absence of a voting rule, on balance any attempt to change the current arrangements may prove more of a distraction from other probably more achievable reforms of the process.

## **Strengthen links to the rest of the UN and international system**

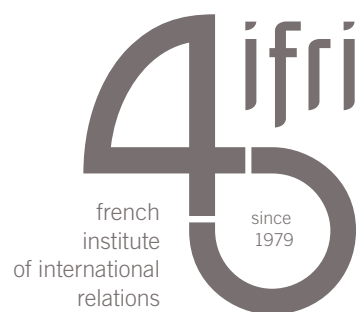
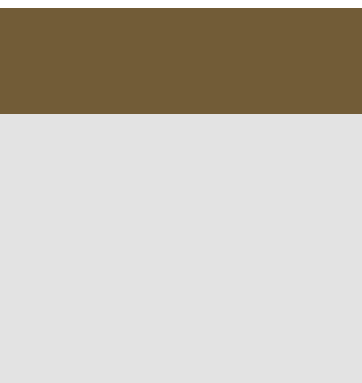
A major debate is underway on the future of the broader UN system – UN80. Whilst the UNFCCC is a treaty body, and not a UN organization as such, the debate does directly concern the future of the UNFCCC and the COP process also since the same questions of how to manage duplication, rationalize processes, improve collaboration and delivery are on the table.

There are good reasons why the UNFCCC process has evolved the way it has, but that does not mean that it should remain the same in the future. The UNFCCC therefore needs to examine its working, the role and organization of its secretariat, and its relationship with other organizations within the broader UN system. Given the strengths it has gained, including the huge political leverage offered by the climate COP and its participation compared to many other multilateral fora, and the increasing involvement of non-state actors, it would be reasonable to reject simplistic proposals for simplification or reorganization. But that creates the opportunity to consider how the UNFCCC – that is not in itself an implementation agency – can help mobilize the forces of the whole of the UN system and build synergies with other priorities of peace and security, humanitarian affairs, human rights, as well as sustainable development and all of the sustainable development goals.

There are a number of areas that merit specific attention, in particular the links with the other Rio Conventions on Biological Diversity and Desertification. Again, there are good reasons to be wary of simplistic proposals to combine all of these, or even to organise a super-COP where all come together – something that would be very difficult to organise and that misunderstands the very different focuses of each of these conventions and the actors they each need to involve. But there are important areas of synergies that deserve greater focus – including around land-use, the ocean and food production. Coordination and collaboration could be strengthened in several ways, through the formal agendas, through a better use of joint meetings of the secretariats, but also through the action agenda and its focus on implementation that facilitates bringing together key players at a national level.

There could be similar, more structured coordination with other treaties and UN bodies, including with the Montreal protocol on ozone and with the International Maritime Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization in respect of the different areas overseen by each of them.





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