

Explainer

COP30

What to Expect

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WHAT IS COP?

From November 10-21, 2025, Brazil will host COP30 in the Amazonian city of Belém, with tens of thousands of delegates, journalists, civil society, and industry representatives expected to attend the summit. A Conference of the Parties (COPs) is a meeting of signatories to international treaties, and there are many kinds of COPs on issues ranging from anti-corruption to chemical weapons or biological diversity. Today, the term ‘COP’ is most widely associated with the climate summits held under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The COP meeting serves as the main decision-making platform for the parties to the UNFCCC and convenes annually, unless determined otherwise. These conferences are designed to assess how well countries are meeting their climate goals and to track each party’s progress toward the overarching objectives of the Convention.

The UNFCCC, agreed to by 198 parties, aims to achieve the “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic [human-made] interference with the climate system.” Defining what counts as ‘dangerous’ climate change involves both scientific assessments of the expected consequences of global warming, and moral or political judgments on how much damage is considered acceptable. In the early 1990s, when the treaty was agreed, the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) determined that the rise of global temperatures to 2°C above pre-industrial levels would be the threshold beyond which catastrophic impacts on ecosystems and societies would rise sharply. Thus, the concept of a ‘dangerous’ level of climate change was quantified and accepted, and the 2°C threshold has served as an important baseline in subsequent climate negotiations.

Each COP is led by a different host country, which usually takes on the role of COP President, organizing and facilitating that year’s summit. The meetings center on detailed negotiations and political debates, often concluding with either a legally binding treaty or a non-binding declaration, typically named after the host city, such as the Kyoto Protocol or the Paris Agreement. The Kyoto Protocol, adopted at COP3 in 1997, marked the first major legally binding treaty under the UNFCCC framework. It obligated industrialized countries to specific, individualized emissions reduction targets that would be tracked, with progress being monitored through the retention of individual emissions records.

Although the idea of limiting global warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels had emerged in the 1990s, it was only at COP21 in 2015 that the Paris Agreement formally incorporated the temperature target into a legally binding framework. The agreement commits countries to limit global warming to 2°C and pursue efforts to cap the rise

at 1.5°C. When the Paris Agreement was introduced, it effectively took the place of the Kyoto Protocol. As of today, 195 of the 198 parties to the UNFCCC formally ratified the Paris Agreement. Once the United States (US) follows through on President Donald Trump's announcement to withdraw from the treaty for a second time, it will join the ranks of Iran, Yemen, and Libya as the only four states that are not party to the agreement. To date, only a few COP outcomes have created legally binding obligations, while most others result in declarations, pledges or frameworks that are more politically, rather than legally, binding.

Officially, decisions at COPs are made by consensus, meaning that all countries, from global powers to small island states, must agree before new measures are adopted. Despite supposed voting equality in this consensus-based model, in practice, debates have divided Global North and Global South countries, with larger and wealthier nations often holding more influence in the negotiation process, while lower-income or climate-vulnerable countries struggle to be heard on equal terms.

Moreover, although the public mostly sees heads of state and government ministers at COP, they are not the only participants. A broad mix of actors attend, hoping to shape the outcome of negotiations, from environmental advocates to powerful private sector actors. Fossil fuel companies often have a strong presence, sometimes to influence climate policies that threaten their bottom line, other times pledging to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. Indigenous communities and environmental defenders also regularly attend to advocate for stronger protections for their lands, rights, and ecosystems. However, generally, the imbalance of private sector interests against the voices of climate-vulnerable populations reinforces the reality that COPs do not always operate at a level playing field. Those with greater financial and political resources are often better positioned to shape the direction of a given year's climate policy, even when their interests may contradict valid calls for wider climate justice and equity.

WHAT HAPPENED AT COP29?

Prior to Brazil's COP30 Presidency, COP29 was hosted by Baku, Azerbaijan. In November 2024, negotiations reportedly continued until 2:40am on November 24, more than a full day past the official deadline, before countries finally reached an agreement on climate finance commitments.

The most significant outcome of the summit was the establishment of the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG), a non-binding climate financing target to mobilize at least \$300 billion annually to support developing nations in addressing the impacts of climate change. These efforts are to be led by developed countries, as defined by the UNFCCC in 1992, with developing countries making voluntary contributions.

However, with countries like China or India still classified as ‘developing’, this model has highlighted limitations around how responsibility is defined within the global climate finance system. The NCQG agreement also included the Baku-Belém Roadmap, a framework that sets a longer-term target of increasing climate finance to \$1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

The fraught debates at COP29 left many developing countries deeply disappointed and demonstrated a growing pessimism about the future of the current COP process. Many voiced strong dissatisfaction with the \$300 billion target, arguing it does not reflect the scale of their climate challenges. India described the sum as “abysmally poor,” while Cuba, Bolivia, and Nigeria, pointed out that, adjusted for inflation, the new goal barely triples the original \$100 billion pledge first made at COP15 in 2009. Echoing this frustration, the Alliance of Small Island States walked out of negotiations on the NCQG in protest of what they viewed as insufficient financial commitments. Still, some have highlighted that when NCQG discussions began just three years ago, it would have been nearly unthinkable for all Parties to even discuss climate finance in the trillions. That such an aspirational figure is now part of the official roadmap is, in and of itself, a significant breakthrough.

According to some analysts, a recurring concern in Baku was how to safeguard the more effective recent years of climate diplomacy from the potential disruption of Trump’s second presidency. Wealthier nations reportedly pushed to set the next major climate finance milestone of \$1.3 trillion for 2035; timing that would allow for renewed US engagement after Trump potentially exits the political stage. But this kind of strategic hedging, shaped by political calculations, often prevents the implementation of bolder and more urgent decisions that the climate crisis demands.

Behind closed doors, many COP delegates voiced deep frustration with the COP process itself. During the summit, a group of prominent climate figures wrote a public letter declaring that COP was “no longer fit for purpose” and calling for structural reform. While conversations on climate finance continue to evolve, there remains a clear reluctance from developed nations to meet the scale of support needed. This resistance is hampering efforts to lift climate-vulnerable communities out of the dire situations that they continue to face.

The disappointment of COP29 stood in contrast to the previous year’s COP28, hosted in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which marked a major milestone with the completion of the first ‘Global Stocktake’, in which each country’s implementation of the Paris Agreement and progress towards its goals was reviewed. Moreover, the goal to “transition away from fossil fuels” was articulated in UN climate language for the first time. Yet at COP29, this commitment was noticeably absent. In the UAE, several private sector fossil fuel companies also made public pledges to reduce their emissions,

however, no such industry commitments were renewed or reinforced at COP29. This sharp difference between consecutive summits highlights the unpredictability of COP outcomes and the influence that host countries wield over how far negotiations go. The question now facing observers is which of these two examples Brazil will follow.

WHAT'S ON THE AGENDA AT COP30?

COP30 must do the difficult job of restoring confidence in the process following the disappointment of COP29. In preparation for COP30, the summit's President, Brazilian Ambassador André Corrêa do Lago, released a fourth open letter addressed to all delegates, laying out the Action Agenda for Brazil's hosting of the conference. Rather than introducing new frameworks or making fresh promises, the Brazilian presidency has signaled a desire to focus on delivering on existing commitments, which amount to approximately 400 pledges made over the last few COPs. The letter identifies six thematic priorities: accelerating the transition in energy and transport systems; safeguarding biodiversity; overhauling agri-food systems; building climate-resilient cities; advancing human development; and unlocking finance and technology.

Brazil is also aiming to restore trust in the COP process by introducing the concept of *mutirão*, a Brazilian idea rooted in Indigenous culture that calls for collective community effort. In line with this approach, the country is backing the Global Citizen Assembly, an initiative designed to bring together local citizen assemblies from around the world to provide ordinary people with the opportunity to contribute to global negotiations. Organizations like the European Democracy Hub have highlighted the value of citizen assemblies, noting that data on citizens' opinions can strengthen the will of politicians to address climate issues and mitigate fears of political backlash. If integrated into future COPs, these assemblies could have tangible results in the long-term, provided their voices are seriously integrated in the debates and negotiations of the summits.

This year's COP30 also unfolds against the backdrop of a forceful BRICS joint statement that underscores the bloc's collective climate priorities and political positioning. The BRICS group reaffirmed its unity in pursuing the goals of the Paris Agreement and voiced full support for a successful COP30 in Belém, which they hope will “catalize [catalyze] progress in implementing the UNFCCC.” Framing climate action as inseparable from development, the statement called for a supportive international economic system that allows developing countries to better address climate change, while also rejecting unilateral measures such as carbon border adjustment mechanisms, deforestation regulations, and environmental due diligence laws, labeling them as discriminatory and protectionist.

For Brazil, the host country of both BRICS and COP30 in 2025, the declaration sets both a mandate and an opportunity for reflection. Whether Brazil can deliver on the

climate justice front, while reconciling its own economic interests, will be a key point of contention at the summit.

WHY IS BRAZIL'S HOSTING OF COP30 SIGNIFICANT?

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva chose to host this year's COP near the Amazon, a symbolic and strategic decision, and his administration invested over \$800 million to ready Belém for the summit. Brazil's role as host carries real significance, not least because the country is already experiencing the severe effects of climate change locally, from raging wildfires in the Amazon to catastrophic floods in southern regions of the country. The climate crisis is already a lived reality for Brazil's people and ecosystems.

Brazil's hosting of COP30 has also sparked criticism focused on its environmental policies, its treatment of Indigenous communities, and its positioning in the global race for rare minerals, highlighting how geopolitical competition may shape the summit's outcomes.

Brazil's Environmental Policies

There are several competing priorities between Brazil's development and climate agendas. Despite making some progress in climate policy and environmental innovation, Brazil remains one of the world's largest carbon emitters. The country has recently put oil and gas exploration rights in 172 areas up for auction, including 47 offshore sites near the Amazon River delta. Although these moves are framed as part of a broader development strategy, designed to attract investment and stabilize the Brazilian job market, the environmental costs will be undeniable. President Lula has claimed that the fossil fuel revenue will provide necessary financing for the transition to renewable energy and the protection of Brazil's forests. However, environmental organizations have estimated that, if fully extracted and burned, fossil fuels from these zones could release over 11 billion tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. This balancing act between internal economic growth through resource extraction on the one hand, and the appeal of framing Brazil as a climate justice leader on the other, captures a broader dilemma facing many countries in the Global South about how to meet development goals without deepening the existing climate crisis.

Indigenous Rights

Indigenous rights will also be a central focus at Brazil's COP, particularly in light of the fluctuating attention they have received in the most recent summits. At COP28, the UAE introduced several initiatives aimed at strengthening Indigenous representation

within the climate negotiations process. Yet at COP29 in Baku, these efforts were quietly dropped, with no clear follow-up, and the concerns of Indigenous Peoples were noticeably absent from the final declaration. This regression not only exposes how easily progress can be reversed from one summit to the next, but also raises alarms about the protection of climate-vulnerable communities in a negotiation process that lacks consistency. It now falls to Brazil, home to more than 1.7 million Indigenous people, to determine the direction of the summit, and which issues will be prioritized. Brazil has set one of the goals of COP30 as to “showcase Indigenous territories as part of the fight against the climate crisis.” Yet, preparations for the summit, including a highway cutting 13km through protected rainforest, cruise port expansions, airport upgrades, and a massive city park, have led to the destruction of mature rainforest, which Indigenous activists have spoken out against.

The protection of Indigenous lands is framed as a key issue for Brazil’s climate justice efforts, yet the very infrastructure being built for COP30 risks undermining the cause. If COP30’s legacy is to be meaningful, the protection of Indigenous rights needs to be a priority, lest the very process of holding climate negotiations threatens the historical and cultural ties between Indigenous Peoples and their land.

Rare Minerals & Geopolitical Competition

The Amazon has also become a battleground for global competition over rare earths with devastating impacts on the ecosystem. Mineral extraction will likely become one of the defining topics of COP30, especially given their critical role for clean energy technologies. The competition over critical minerals sits at the heart of a broader shift in global power, and the summit will not only focus on how to save the planet, but it will also probe questions on who gets to lead it. Chinese companies have secured access to Brazilian mines rich in copper, tin, lithium, and other critical materials, deepening Beijing’s influence in Latin America. These purchases give China leverage in global climate negotiations and highlight the country’s influence in international decision-making. The US also falls at the center of potential rare minerals negotiations at the summit, despite no longer being part of the COP process. President Trump has adopted a clear approach to rare minerals: restoring US economic dominance in sectors where it has declined, with the rare minerals industry being a key priority. Brazil will face a difficult strategic decision between deepening ties with China, its largest trading partner and billion-dollar investor in mining, and balancing its diplomatic relations with the US, which may offer incentives, or exert pressure, to shift its alliances. How these geoeconomic tensions will play out in the climate negotiations at COP30 remains to be seen.

WHAT ARE THE BROADER CRITIQUES OF THE COP PROCESS?

Beyond the criticism being directed specifically at Brazil, the COP process faces broader criticisms, both from its own attendees and the wider international community.

A key weakness of the COP process is its consensus-based model, which often requires a compromise between those suffering the impacts of climate change and those profiting from its root causes. Decisions on financial pledges or emissions goals are thus often made on arbitrary political terms, and are influenced by bilateral relations between countries, rather than on the basis of scientific and social fact about what is necessary to prevent the adverse effects of climate change.

The lack of enforcement on climate agreements also remains a major issue. Agreements made at COPs are typically not legally binding and even those that are often lack concrete follow-up and enforcement mechanisms. Even bold commitments, such as the language around fossil fuel phase-out and private sector pledges introduced at COP28, can be quickly sidelined the following year, as was the case in Baku.

Implementation of the terms of any given agreement also depends heavily on the political will of individual governments. With each change in leadership, priorities can shift, and promises made by one administration may be abandoned by the next. The return of President Trump, who had withdrew the US from the Paris Agreement during his first term and repeated the move shortly after his second inauguration, exemplifies how easily climate commitments can be reversed.

As these cycles of delay and bureaucracy continue, public confidence in the UN climate process has diminished. Increasingly, voices from the Global South, climate-affected communities, and climate justice activists are questioning whether COP can still deliver meaningful change or if it has lost relevance for the billions living on the frontlines of the climate crisis.

CAN COP BE REFORMED?

Amid the escalating impacts of climate change and the failures of negotiations at COP meetings, there is growing consensus that the COP process must undergo systemic reform in order to become a more effective authority on the climate crisis. A wave of open letters, including from the Executive Secretary of the UNFCCC Secretariat Simon Stiell and UN Secretary-General António Guterres, have called for a fundamental transformation of how COPs are organized. The suggestions for reform range from introducing stricter eligibility criteria for host countries, excluding those that do not support fossil fuel phase out, to restructuring COPs into more frequent, smaller-scale

meetings focused on implementation rather than negotiation. However, the viability and potential impact of any reforms remain contested. Criticism of COP28 contrasted with the tangible steps agreed at the summit that delivered the most explicit language yet on transitioning away from fossil fuels. A central point to many reform proposals is the call to rebalance power within the COP process. Some have argued for a shift from the current consensus-based model toward a majority-based decision-making process which centers the voices of climate-vulnerable nations and Indigenous Peoples.

Another significant concern about the effectiveness of the COP is the growing disconnect between climate science and decision-making. While COPs rely on institutions like the IPCC, which produces assessment reports that synthesize the latest science and guide goal-setting, there is no permanent scientific advisory body embedded within the COP structure that could conduct its own research and monitor climate-data itself. Reform advocates argue that this weakens the integration of scientific evidence into policy outcomes. This gap is further exacerbated by the rise of climate disinformation, conspiracy theories, and politically-driven climate skepticism, all of which risk influencing the positions that national delegations bring to the negotiation table and can affect the overall decisions made at COP. More fundamentally, critics of the current COP structure also call for recognition of the connection between inequality and environmental degradation, asserting that climate justice cannot be meaningfully addressed without recognizing systemic injustice.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of all reform proposals is dependent on the political will of member countries. Without a collective commitment to restructure and rebalance the COP system, even the most well-intentioned reforms may fail in the face of competing national interests and entrenched geopolitical power dynamics that influence the outcomes, and lack of accountability, at each COP. If the COP process is to remain relevant, the international community will have to rebuild confidence in the UN climate process in Brazil and demonstrate that it can deliver meaningful action to address the threats of climate change, build momentum towards reducing emissions, and guarantee effective climate justice.

About the Author



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