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COP 30 preview: back to reality?



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The host city of this year's COP is known as the gateway to the Amazon, but after the disappointments of recent conferences, can the event still be a gateway to progress on climate commitments?

COP 30, to be held in November in the Brazilian city of Belém, has a lot riding on it. Its predecessor meeting was criticised for a climate finance pledge that was a fraction of what is needed. COP 29 was also characterised by stalled talks on the phasing out of fossil fuels and a sense that the relevance of this annual gathering may be fading.

The Brazilian team that holds the COP 30 presidency is looking to turn things around by making the meeting more efficient – and seeking to avoid distractions caused by controversial new items on the agenda. But can delegates put aside competing priorities to achieve tangible progress?

An opportunity to make headway despite unpromising signs

The meeting takes place amid faltering commitments to climate and the environment. Only a handful of countries party to the Paris Agreement have submitted their 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) – national climate action plans that include emissions reduction targets. Furthermore, US climate finance has stalled under the new administration. In a local reminder of the trade-offs between climate and economic growth, Brazil's oil regulator recently auctioned new drilling rights near the mouth of the Amazon.

On the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement, the COP presidency aims to reinvigorate the event by focusing on themes such as resilience, system transformation and climate equity. It would prefer not to have a single theme dominate the agenda – COP 29 was focused on finance – nor for negotiations to descend into squabbles about wording to describe climate transition. Overall, this COP wants to connect climate policy with the real economy and with “real lives”. In other words, this is about linking climate ambition to everyday realities.



We think COP 30 may well open with frank conversations about temperature scenarios and greater adaptation needs for every 0.1 degrees above 1.5 degrees. After that, here are some of the main topics we expect to be discussed.

Key themes for COP 30



Energy transition. Can the conference avoid messy disputes over fossil fuel targets while promoting energy transition? COP is likely to play it safe by focusing on renewable energy growth, energy efficiency and sector transformations. However, credible systemic change is challenged by the climate finance retreat in the US, populist pressure on green policies in Europe, and the world's renewable powerhouse, China, approving coal plants at record levels. China has recently committed to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 7–10% by 2035, a target widely criticised as unambitious compared with what is feasible. The gap between its stated ambition and its clean energy momentum underscores both China's outsized influence on the global transition and the credibility gap that still haunts international climate pledges.



Just transition. Brazil's focus on climate equity and justice could highlight the theme of "just transition", which envisions a fair and inclusive shift to a low-carbon economy. Although the withdrawal of the US from the Just Energy Transition Partnership was a setback, COP 30 could build on the progress of the Just Transition Work Programme at the Bonn Climate Conference in June, which agreed a provisional text to advance the programme. The level of youth engagement on the topic was a standout. But concrete progress on funding, climate education, retraining for green skills and social safety nets is required.



Biodiversity. This is likely to remain a secondary topic. Biodiversity is barely mentioned in the first letter by COP 30 President André Aranha Corrêa do Lago. Brazil itself has difficult domestic issues to navigate; its antitrust regulator recently sought to suspend the Amazon Soy Moratorium, which is meant to prevent deforestation caused by soy production. Yet the country is still expected to launch a USD 125 billion "Tropical Forest Forever Facility" at COP 30, which would reward countries that protect their forests. Whether wealthier nations will back the fund remains uncertain.



Agriculture and food systems. Despite the relative silence on biodiversity, COP 30 is likely to include a focus on food systems and climate mitigation. The COP presidency wants to reframe agriculture from an emissions source to a driver of resilience and mitigation. Technology is critical here.



Adaptation to physical risks. We think climate change adaptation will be a major topic – it was one of the few positive developments from COP 29. Last year saw the launch of a support programme for National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) in the least developed economies. The adaptation finance gap – the difference between estimated adaptation costs and available finance – was formally recognised in the dialogue. The presidency has emphasised that adaptation must be a core element of global policy and infrastructure planning, so expect resilience for cities, infrastructure and water to be in focus. While progress on raising adaptation financing is unlikely, the Global Goal on Adaptation, aimed at setting clear indicators of global progress, could be an important interim success.



Human and social development. The impact of climate change on health, and the effort to promote resilient health systems, should be high on the agenda. Brazil is developing the Belém Health Action Plan for the health sector's adaptation to climate change.



Climate finance. It has been a challenging year for climate finance. Some of the world's biggest banks withdrew from the Net Zero Banking Alliance – an industry group aimed at limiting emissions. The US Federal Reserve took itself out of the Network for Greening the Financial System. There were setbacks in voluntary reporting on climate, and evidence of rising levels of fossil fuel financing. However, away from US influence, jurisdictions including China made steady progress on regulatory disclosures on climate.



Climate technology. This could be critical in motivating climate finance as ensuring a broad and equitable reach of climate technology will be key. The Declaration on Green Digital Action and a dedicated Digitalisation Day took centre stage at COP 29. This year, COP is likely to build on this foundation by showcasing the latest climate technologies.

The significance of hosting COP 30 in a city on the edge of the world's largest rainforest will not be lost on delegates at this year's conference. But just as the Amazon faces daunting threats – from deforestation, mining and pollution – COP faces urgent challenges in its pursuit of progress on climate change. While agreement across the full sweep of discussion topics is unrealistic, we hope that commitments on key issues, such as climate adaptation, healthcare and technology, could restore the sense of purpose and relevance that COP desperately needs.

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