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Beyond COP 2026

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Executive Summary

The problem: COP30 was meant to usher in an "implementation phase," yet the political momentum behind the 2015 Paris Agreement appears exhausted. COPs have been loaded with expectations that far exceed what a two-week, consensus-based negotiation among nearly two hundred Parties can deliver. Some of the format's shortcomings are inherent to the problem of climate change, and no procedural reform will remove them, but others can and must be fixed.

What COPs are for: Before turning to reform, we need to be clear about what the format can and cannot do. The UNFCCC fosters global climate governance unlike any other current forum: it sets goals with universal legitimacy, frames issues, keeps score through the Global Stocktake and rallies political attention. It is poorly suited, however, to act quickly in specific sectors such as; experimenting, representing non-State actors, and updating its own rules.

We argue for a two-pronged approach:

1. COP: Reform the COP to ensure its success in delivering action from commitments. The COP should be smaller and have a more streamlined agenda, more frequent intersessional work led by coalitions of the willing, and clearer decision rules. Universal participation would remain for goal-setting, adaptation, loss and damage, and finance.

2. COP ecosystem: Multiply catalytic action outside the multilateral perimeter and connect it back to the COP. Sector-, Region-, or topic-specific coalitions and conferences let early movers lower the costs of action for others. Engaging in plurilateralism to address the transboundary causes and effects of the climate crisis remains crucial to harmonize collective efforts of willing countries. To remain legitimate, they need open membership and a duty to report. Explicit "docking stations" would link them to the formal COP process.

Participation: Through this two-pronged approach, we suggest expanding the diversity of participants by *both* capping the delegation party size of each country at the COP itself (1) and lowering the practical barriers to attendance to the COP ecosystem as a whole (2). Recognized constituencies should then upgrade from observer status to consultation rights, as the Arctic Council does for Indigenous Permanent Participants. This approach would ensure productivity and emphasize broad strategic commitment to climate governance.

Finance: Neither prong is credible without greater finance justice. The new collective quantified goal leaves a wide gap between pledges and needs, and much of what is delivered arrives as debt-creating loans. The obligations of Article 9 of the Paris Agreement must remain central rather than be displaced by the voluntarism of clubs.

These changes can be introduced without amending the Convention or the Agreement, and they map onto existing efforts, notably the Climate Governance Commission's proposals.

Background

The formal closing of COP30, almost a year ago in Brazil, should have marked the beginning of the "implementation phase", or, as COP30 President Andre Correa do Lago said, the "post-negotiation" phase. This shift in language was meant to signal a response to those who had argued for the need to find different ways forward in the face of the worsening climate impacts. As delegates prepare to travel to Antalya, Türkiye, for COP31, it is legitimate to ask them, global leaders, and ourselves, as a community of research and practice, whether things are moving in the right direction.

Part of the answer lies in a mismatch that this paper takes as its point of departure: COPs have been loaded with expectations that far exceed what a two-week, consensus-based negotiation among nearly 200 Parties can achieve.

This debate is not new, but COP30 can serve as a symbolic milestone on which to build a further case for change.

As global temperatures and emissions continue to rise, the debate on the political instruments available to address the crisis becomes more salient with every tenth of a degree. There have been positive steps in recent years, such as the establishment of the Loss and Damage fund, the reference to the transition away from fossil fuels in the first Global Stocktake and the new collective quantified goal on climate finance.

Existing proposals

The Club of Rome letters: The debate on reforming the COP is not new. In the open letter "Reform the COP Process," circulated by the Club of Rome in February 2023 and signed by leading figures including a former UN Secretary-General, the signatories argued that the UNFCCC system is not designed to deliver at the required scale and speed.

They proposed to:

- reduce the size of COPs drastically;
- allow for three to four intersessional meetings a year,
- coordinate action and decision-making through a troika of the incoming, outgoing and current Presidencies;

- give non-state actors, including civil society, business and indigenous peoples, a structured and legitimized role in the process;
- concentrate political energies on six pillars: knowledge exchange and technology co-development; aligning mitigation plans with science; adaptation; finance; delivery; and accountability.

A second letter, in November 2024, added:

- smaller, more frequent, solution-driven meetings at which countries report on progress.
- strict eligibility criteria for COP presidencies and host countries, requiring support for the transition away from fossil fuels and a demonstrated commitment to the goals of the Paris Agreement;
- stronger transparency and disclosure rules for lobbyists;
- standardized definitions and common reporting frameworks for tracking climate finance, given the growing share of pledges delivered as interest-bearing loans;
- a permanent scientific advisory body formally part of the COP structure, on the model of the one in the Convention on Biological Diversity;
- a stronger Global Stocktake, with peer review, independent scientific oversight and transparent tracking of pledges;
- a Climate-Poverty Policy Envoy, to anchor the links between poverty, inequality and planetary stability in the negotiations.

Vision's earlier proposals: Vision has made similar arguments at previous conferences, proposing transforming COPs into regional, operational forums organized by technology or topic. The paper prepared for the 2024 Dolomite Conference (*From Dubai to Baku: Three ideas to kick-start a debate*) advanced three proposals that the present paper takes as its starting point:

1. **Finance:** the consolidation of a fragmented landscape of some twenty-nine multilateral funds, only three of which have ever disbursed more than one billion dollars, and a small executive body to monitor them between sessions.
2. **Decision-making:** negotiation through around ten geographical or interest-based blocs, with seats for actors currently absent from the table, namely cities, the poles and the oceans, a citizens' assembly and the scientific community.
3. **The COP as a global platform:** the conversion of its core from national pavilions into a knowledge-management hub organized around problems to be solved.

The Climate Governance Commission provides the most structured effort to date, working with partners such as CEEW, WRI Africa and Plataforma CIPÓ through its implementation platform, MEGA. With the support of key members of the COP30 Presidency, the Commission refined its priority proposals in July 2026; Slovenia, the Chair of the Circle of COP Presidencies, and the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States have expressed interest in advancing them. Three strands stand out.

1. Strengthening the climate COP through foresight-oriented Earth system science and enhanced accountability under the Paris Agreement.
2. QA Planetary Emergency Platform to accelerate response across the international system, a model proposed by the UN Secretary-General and taken up in the Pact for the Future, supplemented by Earth system monitoring and a Policy Innovation Hub.
3. An International Environment Court, building on recent advisory opinions at ITLOS and the ICJ, and a Global Environment Organization.

As these efforts show, there has been a great deal of debate around COP reform, but little coordinated action. Proposals mostly float around without being concrete enough to act on. What we propose here is not entirely new. It reemphasizes certain points from these earlier efforts, builds on them, and, above all, calls for a wider, more concerted push.

Theoretical Lens

The Venice Conference took place weeks before COP31 in Antalya, Türkiye. Its aim was to provide the global debate on COPs with intellectual tools for what is now an unavoidable reform of the system. It did so by reading the COP through the lens of what Thomas Hale (2024) has called long problems.

Climate change is the archetypal long problem in Hale's sense: a problem whose causes and effects unfold over more than one human lifetime, through long and uncertain chains of causation, and whose nature changes as it progresses. Hale identifies three structural difficulties that follow from this:

1. **The Early action paradox:** the costs of action are certain and immediate, whereas its benefits are uncertain and distant, so that the incentive to act is weakest precisely when action would be most effective.
2. **The problem of shadow interests:** those with the largest stake in today's decisions, future generations and the populations that will bear the brunt of impacts, are absent from the deliberations.
3. **Institutional lag:** institutions designed for one phase of a problem persist into phases for which they are ill-suited.

This lens clarifies the reform debate in two ways.

1. Some shortcomings routinely attributed to the COP process are not design flaws but properties of the problem: the growing complexity of negotiations and the hard trade-offs between present and future, between regions and communities, and between incumbents and newcomers reflect a long-standing problem that no procedural reform can eliminate.
2. We must distinguish between what COPs can deliver and what the format is unsuited for. Hale's repertoire for governing across time includes foresight, long-term goals that endure, the lengthening of political time horizons, the representation of shadow interests, and institutions capable of adapting as the problem evolves. He labels this logic 'catalytic cooperation' (2020), whereby institutions work to shift actors'

preferences and strategies toward cooperative outcomes over time, thereby creating 'domino effects'.

From this distinction follows the two-pronged approach that structures this paper. The first prong is to reform the COP so that it does better what it was created for: fewer participants, clearer decision rules, a clearer division of labor among countries, more transparency and more structured participation. The second is to multiply initiatives for implementation outside the multilateral sphere to do what the COP cannot, following the catalytic logic described by Hale, whereby early movers lower the costs and raise the benefits of action for those who follow, while connecting these initiatives to the COP through explicit channels so that their results flow back into the formal process.

Proposal

First prong: a smaller, clearer and more transparent COP

Previous proposals to reduce the scale of the COP should be the basis for every new idea. The Turkish Presidency of COP31 is reportedly preparing for more than 100,000 participants. That would make Antalya the largest COP ever, directly contradicting what experts and practitioners have long advocated. The first concern is the conference's carbon footprint. For COP31, it will likely surpass Dubai's total of 333,000 tons of CO2, equivalent to the emissions of 72,500 gasoline-powered passenger cars driven continuously for a year.

Part of the structural failure of recent COPs stems from conflating three very different gatherings into a single venue: a technical treaty negotiation, a broad citizens' summit, and a corporate/commercial trade fair. To unbundle this triple function and reduce scale without silencing civil society, the core treaty negotiation should be spatially and temporally decoupled from the citizens' summit and the commercial fair, i.e., the second and third functions.. Restricting official negotiating sessions to a lean body of essential diplomats (~5,000 delegates), potentially hosted at a permanent technical hub such as the UNFCCC headquarters in Bonn, would eliminate organizational gridlock, reduce carbon footprints, and protect negotiators from lobbyist pressures, while allowing public and commercial summits to meet independently - with more productive representation in the technical treaty negotiations.

The problem is also structural. The COP faces a double risk of capture by dynamics external to its core membership:

1) Corporate interests, often intertwined with national ones: To address corporate capture, the UNFCCC should adopt a formal conflict-of-interest framework modeled on Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This framework would require mandatory disclosure of fossil-fuel lobbying expenditures and prohibit fossil-fuel representatives from holding seats on official state negotiating delegations.

2) The consensus rule, which means the COP will always show the ‘floor’ of negotiations rather than the ‘ceiling’

To ensure the COP delivers, we suggest a division of labor over time and space:

Division of labor in time

The COP should do less at each session and let more of the work happen between sessions.

1. A “back to basics” COP. Each COP should set clear aspirations and follow a streamlined agenda in which only a small number of items are negotiated.

2. Smaller, more frequent conferences throughout the year, led by coalitions of the willing. Most of the technical and political work would be done in advance. The annual COP would then endorse outcomes, rally political support and set direction, rather than start negotiations from scratch.

Division of labor in space

The second reform concerns where the work happens. A single global gathering cannot deliver action tailored to very different regional circumstances, and much of the practical implementation work is better done closer to where it happens.

The universal format treats the climate challenge as a single negotiation, even though countries differ widely in emissions, transition pathways, and capacity to implement. Parties do not have equal access to data, technology, and finance, and the largest annual gathering in history is expensive and distant for many of those most affected.

Part of the COP’s work should be moved into regional and operational forums:

- Regional forums organized by technology or topic, as Vision has proposed at previous conferences, where countries with shared geographies or interests work on delivery together.
- Regional meetings throughout the year, which also carry the intersessional work described above and bring in actors who rarely reach the annual COP.

Second prong: catalytic action outside the multilateral perimeter through a COP ecosystem

Why now? Climate clubs and coalitions of the willing have been discussed since the start of the UNFCCC negotiations. What is new is why the debate is resurfacing. The UN has rarely been so openly contested and so financially constrained as under the second Trump administration, and groupings such as the BRICS, the G77 or the G20 now carry most multilateral dossiers, with no clear majority view on world issues. In response, key countries have begun launching minilateral, club-like or plurilateral coalitions outside the negotiating rooms. One example is the Open Coalition on Compliance Carbon Markets, launched at

COP30 and co-led by Brazil, the EU and China to improve the transparency and interoperability of regulated carbon markets. These coalitions are not created for prestige. Those who act are trying to prevent the system from collapsing. In Hale's terms, they address the early action paradox directly, i.e., a subset of actors bears the certain costs of acting first, expecting to catalyze others. If they succeed, they could also shape the formal process, starting with issue framing, meaning the emergence of new topics or workstreams that are extremely hard to introduce in today's multilateral setting. Such a role might even provide them with first-mover advantage.

Example: The first Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels (Santa Marta, Colombia, April 2026), co-hosted by Colombia and the Netherlands, shows how this can work: a non-negotiated format, deliberately placed outside the UNFCCC, which gathered 57 countries around the issue that COP30 had been unable to put on paper and that the COP process overall had broadly ignored. It produced voluntary national roadmaps, three working streams, a science panel and a coordination group to ensure continuity until a second conference in Tuvalu in 2027. Crucially, its outcomes were designed to flow back into the multilateral process: formally submitted to the COP30 presidency, which is preparing the global roadmap announced in Belém, discussed with the COP31 presidencies with a view to the action agenda, and aimed at making the transition away from fossil fuels a central agenda item up to the second Global Stocktake in 2028.

The African Group of Negotiators has objected that such coalitions lack multilateral legitimacy. This is why the link back matters. It is also important to ensure that these groups remain open over time, as new countries apply to join.

Further possibilities: Sector- and topic-specific coalitions deserve particular attention as the natural unit of this second prong. They organize cooperation around a defined set of technologies, incumbents and standards, where catalytic dynamics operate most directly: a shared standard for low-emission steel or cement, or a common abatement regime for methane from fossil fuel operations, can shift costs and expectations across an entire industry. Precedents such as the Global Methane Pledge, the Breakthrough Agenda on affordable clean technologies, and the G7-initiated Climate Club have an uneven record, largely because they lack binding commitments, comparable metrics, and a channel back into the formal process. We therefore propose pushing for topic- or sector-specific coalitions and attaching docking stations to each, as described below.

Addressing Risks

Our proposals carry four risks, which we address in turn.

1. **Exclusion of countries and of people:** coalitions of the willing may leave out the unwilling or the unable and become a cartel of incumbents, while young people, indigenous peoples, local communities and future generations, whose interests are most affected, may remain without a voice both inside the COP and in the new formats.

2. **A missing link between inside and outside:** action outside the COP may remain disconnected from the formal process, so its results never feed back in.
3. A **lack of accountability** for results delivered outside the multilateral perimeter.
4. The **voluntarism of clubs** could displace binding finance obligations.

These risks ought to be addressed through four core commitments:

1. Ensure inclusion for all

Within the COP: Building on the Vision 2025 Conference, one may still ask why megacities such as Shanghai, Lagos and New York have no seat at the climate table, while microstates such as Andorra, Lesotho, and Liechtenstein do. The answer lies in the Westphalian nature of the UN system, in which only States hold seats.

The question carries more weight once the COP is understood as the governance of a long problem. Cities and even more megalopoles are often the most committed and sometimes the most capable of delivering effective action while the people most affected by its decisions, namely young people, indigenous peoples, local communities and future generations, are the "shadow interests" that Hale identifies as structurally under-represented.

Inclusion should therefore go well beyond observing the negotiations and delivering short statements in plenary. We propose two steps:

1. **Lower the barriers to participation.** Visa regimes, accommodation prices and the cost of attending a two-week conference on another continent decide who is in the room long before anyone asks who may speak. Host-country selection criteria should include guarantees of affordable access.

2. **Move beyond observer status by granting consultation rights.** A useful, if much smaller, precedent is the Arctic Council. Six organizations of Arctic indigenous peoples hold Permanent Participant status there and must be consulted before decisions are taken, without holding a vote. A comparable status for the recognized UNFCCC constituencies would give substance to the seats proposed in Vision's 2024 paper.

These criteria would also apply to the suggested intersessional and regional conferences.

Outside the COP, club diplomacy carries exclusion traps that its advocates should not downplay. Every coalition of the willing implicitly defines a coalition of the unwilling or the unable:

- Least developed countries and small island States that cannot follow several formats at once.
- Producer economies whose transition is the most costly.
- Populations whom the chosen standards ignore.

Pushed too hard, club diplomacy becomes a cartel of incumbents. Its legitimacy therefore depends on three conditions: open membership, accession pathways, and an obligation to report back to the universal forum.

2. Design and provide docking stations

Issue framing is only the softest channel through which the outside can shape the inside. The coalitions, clubs, and conferences around the COP should be treated as an ecosystem with recognized docking stations into the formal process, rather than a loose cloud of side events. At least five such docking stations exist or could be created without amending the Convention:

1. Submission of outcomes to the incoming presidency.
2. Inclusion in the action agenda, with an obligation to report back to the plenary.
3. Recognition in COP decisions. A cover decision welcoming a coalition's roadmaps, standards or finance turns outside momentum into multilateral acquis.
4. Structured input into the Global Stocktake, whose modalities already allow submissions by non-Party stakeholders.
5. Interoperability with mechanisms the UNFCCC runs directly, from the enhanced transparency framework to Article 6.

Fragmenting global climate action into specialized minilateral clubs creates a secondary risk of overlap, duplicate reporting, and "forum shopping" across competing platforms. To keep a multi-hub ecosystem from devolving into administrative chaos, the UNFCCC Secretariat could embed a light-touch Global Coordination & Integration Hub. Its role would not be to dictate terms to independent clubs, but to track active minilateral workstreams, map regional initiatives, and oversee the division of labor across space and time so that decentralized efforts feed directly back into global targets.

3. Ensure transparency and accountability

If implementation moves in part outside the multilateral perimeter, who measures results, who verifies them, and who is accountable? Measurement and verification should stay multilateral even where delivery does not:

- coalition outcomes are reported in the metrics of the enhanced transparency framework;
- they are verified through its expert review;
- they are accounted for in the Global Stocktake.

A coalition that fails to deliver would then be visible to all Parties and, after the 2025 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, to the courts as well.

4. Commit to finance justice more credibly

Neither prong is credible without greater finance justice. The new collective quantified goal left a wide gap between pledges and needs, and much of what is delivered arrives as debt-creating loans. The obligations under Article 9 of the Paris Agreement and the contributions proportional to GDP and emissions proposed in Vision's 2024 paper must remain central rather than be displaced by the voluntarism of clubs.

To reflect credible commitment, the parties would need to stop treating finance as a pledge and run it like a budget. Meaning: a binding split of who pays (fair-share split based on national income and historical emissions with supplements to fill gaps), agreed accounting rules (eg report grant value of loans), steps with dates (such as starting date for adaptation), and new money sources that don't depend on shrinking aid budgets (such as payouts that start automatically after a disaster for the loss and damage fund) .

Conclusions: from Venice to Antalya

Building on the plethora of COP reform proposals already available, we argue for a clear division of roles:

1. **COP:** The COP maintains its Westphalian setting, grounded in the representation of States, as a normative framework that guarantees universal participation. It remains the place where key goals, timelines, issue framing, and the limits of experimentation are collectively agreed. It keeps goal-setting as a core competence by shifting Global Stocktake cycles from retrospective accounting towards forward-looking action.
2. **COP ecosystem:** Implementation (what the Club of Rome calls delivery) happens outside it but in synergy with it, through a collectively orchestrated network of minilateral, club-like and plurilateral "implementation laboratories". These rest on mutual exchange, common but differentiated responsibilities and policy experimentation.

Additionally, Representation: The COP process should be reformed to promote equity, inclusivity, and climate justice, particularly for the most marginalized and climate-vulnerable countries and peoples. This requires ensuring their meaningful participation through inclusive consultations, fair representation in negotiating spaces, and opportunities to contribute to agenda-setting and decision-making.

These changes can be introduced politically and incrementally, COP after COP, without amending the Convention or the Agreement. Institutions governing a long problem must be durable enough to sustain long-term goals and adaptive enough to be updated as the problem changes, and coalitions and clubs provide the experimentation from which such updating can draw.