

Commentary - Rising Voices

A(nother) failed COP: it's time to shift gears

By Deniz Torcu & Gaia Van der Esch – 2024 Rising Talents

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As COP29 in Baku came to a close, it left the world not with renewed hope but with a bitter sense of *déjà vu*. The climate crisis demands bold and immediate action, yet this latest summit delivered the same half-measures and unfulfilled promises that have come to define these annual gatherings. What is most disheartening is that this failure was no surprise—it was anticipated, accepted, and normalized.

The Same Old Story

Among COP29's outcomes was a finance goal of \$300 billion annually by 2035 for developing nations, aimed at helping them adapt to climate impacts and transition to clean energy. While this figure may seem significant, it is a far cry from the trillion-dollar demand made by more vulnerable nations.

On fossil fuels, the summit reaffirmed prior commitments to phase down their use. Yet, no concrete deadlines or binding agreements emerged. This vague language mirrors the indecision of past COPs and does little to hold major polluters accountable.

There was also progress on carbon markets, a long-delayed part of the Paris Agreement. While this helps facilitate country-to-country trading of carbon credits, critics argue that such mechanisms allow wealthier nations to offset emissions without making substantive changes to their energy systems.

Vulnerable nations, already grappling with intensifying storms, droughts, and sea-level rise, left the summit without the resources they very much desperately require.

The much-discussed loss-and-damage fund—a lifeline for countries facing irreversible climate impacts—continues to remain largely symbolic. Without substantial funding commitments from wealthier nations, it risks becoming yet another empty promise.

A Crisis of Leadership

The failure of COP29 is not merely an issue of technical shortcomings—it is a crisis of political will.

The climate crisis has never been clearer: global temperatures surpassed for the first time ever the critical 1.5°C threshold in 2024, bringing catastrophic consequences. Yet, world leaders - of which only 8 out of the 78 attending were women - remain locked in cycles of incrementalism and delay, prioritizing short-term national interests over global survival. And citizens across the world remain stuck in collective apathy. As the summit unfolded, there was little public outcry or expectation of success. We have become desensitized and disillusioned to this ritual of inaction. By losing hope in our politicians and in their capacity to bring change, we lose hope and grit in our own capacity - as citizens - to be part of this change. Inaction and apathy are the worst outcome of any crisis, because they are the forces that lead to the crisis to further escalate.

Shifting direction: Our Call to Action

As we look at COP30 in Brazil, with the hope it will bring a renewed sense of urgency and commitment, we must also look at the structural causes which are making the COP process no longer fit for purpose. As asked by influential leaders and academics in the climate movement, there is a need to reform COP. By moving from negotiation to implementation, by ensuring that the UN Climate Summits ensure fair representation of those most affected, while also striving for gender-balanced delegations. And by establishing stricter criteria for host countries - allowing only countries who are truly committed to climate action and with strict rules on fossil fuel lobbying to host the future COPs.

In parallel, though, we need to re-find the same urgency, hope, and drive for change within each of our countries and communities - be it at the government level, be it at the civil society one, or at the corporate level.

The world cannot afford another year of half-measures and broken promises. Civil society and citizens must reject this normalization of failure, demanding accountability and bold action from governments and corporations alike. And government officials, corporate employees, and leaders from the public and private sector must do the same: the burden of real change is on them.

If we hope to truly address the climate crisis, and ensure 1.5°C stays within reach, we must start by electing and appointing leaders who care about humanity and the planet, not about maintaining their power - no matter what; leaders who have the courage to lead with empathy, not authority; and leaders who have the wisdom to collaborate, not to compete. Leadership traits which are slowly emerging, with female leaders showing the way, but which are still desperately missing around such negotiation tables. And we must each play our part: by demanding concrete measures to halt the climate crisis and holding our governments accountable, but also by being ourselves the change we want to see. Be it in our families, our communities, our schools, our companies - each of us has the power to drive change, to initiate actions that can make a difference for us and for the generations to come.

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