



The “collective therapy session” at UNFCCC COP30: Performing climate finance, avoiding climate debt

ONATI SOCIO-LEGAL SERIES FORTHCOMING

DOI LINK: <https://doi.org/10.35295/OSLS.IISL.2626>

RECEIVED 18 FEBRUARY 2026, ACCEPTED 22 JUNE 2026, FIRST-ONLINE PUBLISHED 9 JULY 2026

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Abstract

This article examines the theatricality of the UNFCCC’s climate finance negotiations at COP30 (Belém, 2025), considering how climate diplomacy operates as a contested political arena in which power is exercised through performative practices. Focusing on the “agenda fight” on climate finance (Article 9.1 Paris Agreement), the study reveals a legitimacy gap rooted in the coloniality of global governance. This article addresses the dilemma that resurfaced at a global event: the mechanisms designed to operationalise Art. 9.1 Paris Agreement, such as climate finance targets, are non-justiciable and constrained by entrenched power structures that dictate their implementation. Instead of encouraging collaborative problem-solving, the Summit’s “Presidency Consultations” served as diplomatic theatre, disguising the unresolved disputes over climate finance. I demonstrate how the Brazilian COP30 Presidency staged the contentious issue as “collective therapy”, and how utilising the indigenous-inspired *mutirão* concept simultaneously exposed and obscured structural flaws in climate governance. I argue that avoiding calling climate finance a *duty* or *debt* reinforces *North-South* hierarchies. While theatricality can create space for marginalised voices to be heard, it can also constrain transformative potential through ritualised symbolic performance.

I like to express my deep gratitude to the Centre for Sustainable Development Law and Policy (CSDLP) at Durham University (officially accredited as UNFCCC observer), for nominating me as Virtual-only observer at COP30. See Durham University’s COP30 report: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/media/durham-university/research/research-centres/centre-for-sustainable-development-law-and-policy/pdfx27s/260126-COP30-report.pdf>. Special thanks to my esteemed colleagues Markus Boeckenfoerde, Kevin Crow, Dirk Hanschel, Martin Ramstedt, Timm Sureau, and Christian Tietje for their valuable feedback and inspiration as well as the very thoughtful two OSLS reviewers which helped me to improve the quality and depth of this article.

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Key words

UNFCCC COP30, climate finance, climate debt, coloniality of global governance, *mutirão*, therapeutic theatricality

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la teatralidad de las negociaciones sobre la financiación climática de la CMNUCC en la COP30 (Belém, 2025), examinando cómo la diplomacia climática funciona como un ámbito político controvertido en el que el poder se ejerce a través de prácticas performativas. Centrándose en la «lucha por la agenda» en torno a la financiación climática (artículo 9.1 del Acuerdo de París), el estudio pone de manifiesto una brecha de legitimidad arraigada en la colonialidad de la gobernanza global. Este artículo aborda el dilema que resurgió en un evento mundial: los mecanismos diseñados para poner en práctica el artículo 9.1 del Acuerdo de París, como los objetivos de financiación climática, no son justiciables y se ven limitados por estructuras de poder arraigadas que dictan su aplicación. En lugar de fomentar la resolución colaborativa de problemas, las «Consultas de la Presidencia» de la Cumbre sirvieron como teatro diplomático, enmascarando las disputas sin resolver sobre la financiación climática. Demuestro cómo la Presidencia brasileña de la COP30 escenificó esta controvertida cuestión como una «terapia colectiva», y cómo el uso del concepto de *mutirão*, de inspiración indígena, puso de manifiesto y, al mismo tiempo, ocultó los defectos estructurales de la gobernanza climática. Sostengo que evitar calificar la financiación climática como una obligación o una deuda refuerza las jerarquías Norte-Sur. Si bien la teatralidad puede crear un espacio para que se escuchen las voces marginadas, también puede limitar el potencial transformador a través de una actuación simbólica ritualizada.

Palabras clave

COP30 de la CMNUCC, financiación climática, deuda climática, colonialidad de la gobernanza global, *mutirão*, teatralidad terapéutica

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1. Introduction

At the 30th *Conference of the Parties* (COP30) to the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC 1992) in Belém, Brazil (2025), diplomats from 198 countries (excluding official delegates from the USA, Myanmar, San Marino and Afghanistan) convened alongside civil society actors, think-tanks and academic institutions with *observer* status (UNFCCC 1996, r. 6-8), and accredited media. With 56,000 delegates attending in person, this climate summit was one of the largest in COP history (McSweety and Woo Nam 2025).

The UNFCCC-COP functions as the global arena for climate governance, diplomacy and politics. It is the supreme decision-making body of the Convention and its subsequent instruments, the Kyoto Protocol (1994) and the Paris Agreement (2015). As part of the international governance system, the COP is predominantly a state-centred forum in which country governments send delegates, and different alliances of states are formed along joint interests. In its governance role, the COP oversees the implementation of the international treaties and protocols, adopts procedural guidelines, reviews national emissions inventories and evaluates progress towards agreed climate targets. The UNFCCC Secretariat administers this process and the COP presidency rotates among the five UN regional groups (UNFCCC 2018, R. 22(1)). The COP30 presidency and conference host Brazil fell under UN's *Latin America and Caribbean States* regional group. Diplomatically, the conference relies on consensus-based decision-making. Although the 1992 Convention envisages formal procedural rules for voting, those rules have never been formally adopted; consequently, consensus operates as the default mechanism for adopting new measures or amendments. This reliance on implicit agreement leads to intense negotiations, as every country must assent before a decision can be taken. The COP thus provides a platform for high-level dialogue on finance, technology transfer and adaptation. Politically, the COP reflects the tension between national priorities and the collective international imperative for ambitious climate action. The COP presidency set the political tone of each annual session, thereby steering the direction of negotiations. Nevertheless, the interplay of official and unofficial activities, communications, public discourse and media coverage, as well as the formal negotiations, collectively shape climate diplomacy during this global event.

These three dimensions operate within deeply entrenched asymmetrical power structures that define the negotiation landscape (Fisher and Ury 2012). Process-oriented analyses such as those conducted at *The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development* have demonstrated that the *Global North*² dominates the multiparty negotiations (from agenda setting to concession exchange). This perpetuates the power relations between industrialised states and those considered “developing” (also reflected in the terminology used by UNFCCC). UNFCCC’s “developed”-“developing” binary is a legal artifact of the post-cold war 1992 Convention’s architecture (Annex I and non-Annex I) and the *Principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities* (CBDR-RC). The former distinguishes between industrialised members of the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) and countries with former Eastern bloc “economies in transition” (EITs). The latter composed

² The terms *Global Norths* and *Global South* are used here in italic to indicate either their hegemonic (North) or marginalised (South) sociopolitical and economic position in international climate discourse.

of developing nations, including groups such as the *Least Developed Countries* (LDCs) and *Small Island Developing States* (SIDS).³ For these countries, "additional finance resources" are essential (Sjöstedt 2005, 183, Sjöstedt and Penetrante 2013).

Focussing on *North-South* negotiations, this article acknowledges that the COP is been often described by journalists and academics as a form of political theatre. Stephen Humphreys (2010, 9), for example, defines the *theatre* [in the context of international rule of law promotion] as "a morality tale staged as a spectacle, drawing on the techniques of rhetoric and the power of performance". At a meta-level, the *setting* is an "overarching backdrop of modernisation in a post-ideological and globalising world" with protagonists and antagonists (Humphreys 2010, 24). Going beyond the metaphorical use, James Ball's in-depth study of performance in international relations offers an analysis of how the UN acts as a global stage on which sovereign states perform a spectacle of diplomacy, thereby transforming the political into the theatrical for a global audience that becomes engaged and capable of intervening in the action (Ball 2020). Applying this analytical lens to climate governance, the COP can be situated within the broader frame of *theatricality*:

International institutions like the UN focus the world's attention on publicly staged spectacles of geopolitics by providing a theatrical frame that makes them legible, meaningful, and efficacious. Via this inherent theatricality, these institutions employ the forces of spectatorship that are drawn into orbit around them. International institutions crystallize a relationship between power and attention that is highly theatrical in its contours and scope (Ball 2020, 5).

A politics of performance perspective to UNFCCC-COP allow contextualising "moments of performance within historical narratives" whereby "dramaturgy is both a mode of spectatorship ... and a mode of action on the world stage" (Ball 2020, 6, 11). It enables one to see how *roles* are assigned, authorised to speak and directed to act in particular styles (Ball 2020, 13). Grasping climate negotiations as theatre underscores the symbolic and strategic nature of diplomatic interactions. It also reveals how hegemonic power is both reinforced and contested within the performative space. Drawing attention to what happens at the formalised negotiation table of UNFCCC-COP, this article focus is on climate finance, which "has always been a central issue at the UN climate negotiations" (Pauw *et al.* 2022, 1241). Considering, for example, the accumulated ethical, political and financial responsibilities of industrialised or "developed" countries towards "developing" countries for damages caused by their historical and cumulative greenhouse gas emissions (Botzen *et al.* 2008, Warlenius 2017, Mohan 2026) – the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015, Art. 9(1)) clearly stipulates: "developed country Parties *shall* provide financial resources to assist developing country Parties with respect to both mitigation and adaptation in continuation of their existing obligations under the Convention".

³ Although this is official diplomatic language, the author views this binary as reinforcing power asymmetries, failing to address historical accountability, and being part of the discursive politics. Therefore, these terms are used in quotation marks to distance the author from this construction.

COP30 provides a concrete case study. In my role as a nominated UNFCCC online observer, I was authorised to watch and interpret the negotiations.⁴ Here I examine how the concrete climate finance negotiations are conducted, exposing structural tensions in global climate governance. Even though Art. 9(1) of the Paris Agreement uses mandatory treaty language (“shall”), it lacks a compliance or standing mechanism to invoke it. COP decisions and political “targets” do not constitute treaty obligations, creating a gap between formal commitments and enforceability. This article addresses the dilemma that resurfaced at COP30: Art. 9.1 establishes obligations that are effectively non-justiciable. The mechanisms designed to operationalise the Paris Agreement, including climate finance “targets”, are also constrained by entrenched power structures that dictate their implementation. Rather than enabling collaborative problem-solving, Summit’s “Presidency Consultations” – the empirical focus of this article – served as a form of symbolic, therapeutic theatre that obscured persistent conflicts over climate finance and stalls meaningful progress, as I will argue. *Firstly*, this paper introduces a dramaturgical performance theory framework supplemented by insights from postcolonial critique to analyse the international climate finance negotiations. Analytical dimensions include *roles* and *scripts* of the participating parties, the interplay between performers and spectatorship as well as power dynamics, including entrenched colonial legacies in climate governance. *Secondly*, this conceptual framework is applied to the global event in Belém, paying attention to the contentious climate finance and the so-called *agenda fight*. This term refers to the struggles over which issues are formally included in the COP agenda, as only items included on the official agenda require a compulsory decision during the respective COP. These disputes are linked to questions of who sets or adds what “items” on the agenda and what issues are excluded or taken off, thereby often reflecting North-South-asymmetries. *Thirdly*, the paper zooms in on a concrete negotiation table during the COP30’s “Presidency Consultations” to examine the *agenda fight* performance on climate finance. These negotiations were staged as “collective therapy sessions” by the Brazilian COP30 presidency. *Fourthly*, by contextualising the therapeutic rhetoric of these negotiations, the paper will reveal the limitations of this approach. *Fifthly*, the analysis examines the performative use of the indigenous-inspired *mutirão* – a concept introduced by the COP30 presidency to encourage collective effort. *Finally*, this paper situates COP’s political outcome – the *Global Mutirão Decision* – within the unfinished climate justice agenda at COP30, emphasising the need to reimagine equitable, decentered frameworks for global climate governance.

Before proceeding, a brief excursus on *mutirão* is necessary to better understand the concept utilised by the diplomats. The term *mutirão*, derived from the Tupi-Guaraní language, embodies a cooperative social practice central to Brazilian local knowledge. Based on solidarity and mutuality, it organises volunteer labour among families and neighbours for tasks and providing mutual support. The system operates on the basis of informal reciprocal obligations: those who receive help are expected to return the favour

⁴ *Digital fieldwork* through online participant observations allowed analysing COP30’s screened negotiations, but inherently limits engagement with all sensory dimensions of in-person ethnography. Virtual participation lacks direct interaction, potentially obscuring the connection between online practices and their broader offline life contexts. Insights derived solely from digital methods may yield an incomplete picture unless supplemented with in-person approaches that contextualise virtual behaviour.

when needed, creating a give-and-take cycle that strengthens social cohesion, shared identity markers, and resilience to market or climatic shocks. It rests on interpersonal trust, communal norms, and a collective commitment to the principle that the communal wellbeing is inseparable from that of each member, making *mutirão* both a practical survival strategy and a symbolic expression of solidarity (Caldeira 1956, Albuquerque and Vasconcellos 2017, 24). Among the Guaraní people, *mutirão* (*potyrô*) functions as the basic economic unit on two interlinked levels. At the extended-family level, members jointly farm shared plots and build houses, guided by small-scale reciprocity (*oreva*). At the political-religious level (*tekoha*), the practice takes on a spiritual significance: the virtues of *tekoporã* underpin the sacred conduct (*tekomarangatu*) that obliges individuals to protect the land (*Yvy*) as a communal, sacred entity (Mizusaki and De Sousa 2022, 303). In urban Brazil, *mutirão* is increasingly invoked in housing, infrastructure and climate-governance debates. Marginalised residents, often invisible to the state, pool knowledge and labour to build housing and communal spaces without seeking financial profit (Coimbra 2017). Understanding this context clarifies which normative value has entered the international political arena and how it was codified in the *Global Mutirão Decision*.

2. Politics of performative climate diplomacy conceptualised

Building on Ball's (2020, 5) assertion that "if diplomacy is theatre, it is also performative", a dramaturgical analysis reveals how diplomatic rituals, roles and narratives shape transnational (in)justice-making. He argues that public diplomacy operates as an "arts of enactment that stabilizes shared narratives to advance specific agendas" (Ball 2005, 5). By applying socio-theatrical frameworks, this paper will reveal how performative dynamics at COPs reflect geopolitical shifts and entrenched *North-South* divide. Dramaturgical analyses can be traced back to Erving Goffman's sociological work (1956, 2f, 8), which frames social interaction as theatrical performances aimed at managing others' perceptions ("impression management"). Goffman (1956, 13) defines performance as "all the activities of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers". From a theatre studies perspective, performance is a collaborative event where actors set decisive preconditions but cannot fully control the course of the performance, as all participants co-create it (Fischer-Lichte 2009). Ball (2020, 19) extends these insights to global institutions, arguing while the "dramaturgy of international institutions governs the theatre that organizes the world", it also "provides the structures with which the world pushes back". *Theatricality* thus serves dual roles: a tool of power and a means for resistance to take action and reframe injustice (Magellson 2021, 186). Five broader dimensions of performative diplomacy can be carved out to be applied to COP negotiations:

Firstly, recognisable *diplomatic roles* – such as "responsible power players", "vulnerable states", or "mediators" – are performative enactments of status and power (Goffman 1956, 9), "render[ing] those arrangements vulnerable to counter-performances" (Ball 2020, 19). Negotiation theory teaches us that negotiations between unequal parties tend to be more effective than symmetrical ones, as power disparities can clarify *roles* and enable appropriate benefits to each side in negotiated agreements, without altering the basic asymmetry between the parties (Zartman and Rubin 2005, 30). This paper

demonstrates how scripted *roles* can become a ritual of controlled disagreement rather than a process for building genuine consensus.

Secondly, these roles are embedded in *scripts*: patterned procedures, narratives and institutional rituals (e.g. statements or resolutions) that structure UN proceedings, involving storylines about peace, development, and rights. *Scripts* assign roles (e.g. “donor” vs. “recipient”) and constrain political discourse. Diplomats “re-stage” these scripts through cross-citations, iterative dialogue, and adaptive storytelling (Ball 2020, 17). Ball (2020, 78-80) emphasises the potential of “insurrectionary speech” – a concept inspired by Judith Butler’s (1997, 15) politics of performance to disrupt hegemonic power structures. By challenging scripted narratives, marginalised political actors can assert agency.

Thirdly, *audiences* – observers, civil society actors, media, and academics – play a critical role in co-participating (Goffman 1956, 8), legitimising or/and contesting diplomatic performances. Ball (2020, 5,11) views the “global political spectatorship” as interdependent process where observers and performers co-construct meaning. Spectators influence how delegates perform and how outcomes are perceived. For instance, media coverage amplifies marginalised voices, while public scrutiny pressures states to align with officially accredited values. The blurred boundaries between actor and audience also underscore the porous nature of power: spectators can both reinforce and destabilise institutional narratives. This lens thus allows examining “how the world watches itself in institutions and beyond, and of what citizens and diplomats do by watching” (Ball 2020, 6).

Fourthly, Goffman’s (1956, 19, 14f) concept of the *social front* (setting, appearance, and manner) explains how delegates manage impressions via “insignia of office or rank, clothing, sex, age... sizes and looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions and bodily gestures”. At COPs, the *front stage* (public negotiations) and *back stage* (informal meetings or presidency consultations) enable strategic impression management, where delegates adopt different personas in relation to the spectatorship. Symbols (such as national flags, clothing or titles), as well as seating and speaking orders signal status and authority. *Speech patterns* (diplomatic vs. emotive language), *body language* (gestures of agreement or resistance) and ritualised behaviour (adherence to formal protocol) are further “techniques of impression management” (Goffman 1956, 70, 132ff). These performances idealise social norms, creating mystification (achieved by maintaining social distance) where spectators “senses secret mysteries and powers behind the performance”, while performers recognise their own limitations (Goffman 1956, 21f, 44f).

Finally, the material and institutional architecture of COPs – the venue, committee rooms, seating arrangements, media setup etc. – function as “live *stage* on which diplomatic performance is disseminated to global spectators” (Ball 2020, 16). Annual shifts in COP locations create a *series of stages* with distinct socio-cultural contexts, each with unique actor-spectator dynamics. Mediatized through live broadcasts and media coverage, COPs extend their reach to the global audiences, shaping both on-site negotiations and public perceptions of climate governance. This dual presence (physical and virtual) underscores COP’s role in mediating geopolitical power structures.

This framework enables us to explore how performative dynamics reveal contested roles and scripts, and the mechanisms employed to resolve intergroup conflicts and navigate power asymmetries. Thus, studying the performative nature of international institutions reveals how power works, helping us "to more clearly recognize both the potentials and pitfalls of diplomatic performance so that we might more efficaciously and justly use them to redraw relations of power" (Magellson 2021, 187).

To engage specifically with power and historical legacies that structure diplomatic practices across the world, a postcolonial perspective allows examining how political and legal structure are influenced by *coloniality* (Quijano 2000) – the often "invisible power structure, an epochal condition, and epistemological design, which lies at the centre of the present Euro-North American-centric modern world" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015, 488). In the context of climate justice, the focus is on ecological expansionism that encompasses atmospheric occupation through carbon commodification, resource extraction, including "CO2lonialism" (carbon-driven exploitation) and the accumulation of ecological debt owed to the *Global South* and the planet earth (Bhambra and Newell 2023, 180). *Climate coloniality* emphasises how historically entrenched CO2 emissions (Gupta 2025) and power dynamics have created unequal climate *vulnerabilities*. It also highlights how international climate policies promote "solutions" (such as CO2-removal or carbon markets) without explicitly addressing the root causes of climate change. It has also been analysed that climate and environmental frameworks are often designed to mainly benefit the economic and political interests of hegemonic economies (The Medellín Group 2025), with various practices such as "debt-trap" (Samba Sylla 2023) as well as "development loans" perpetuate *Southern* dependencies (Anghie 2023, 48). Problematically, climate transitions often frame ecological limits and social impacts of extraction through extractivist economic logics that marginalise approaches centred on ecological guardianship, duty and equity (Isailovic *et al.* 2024). This raises a key question: whose knowledges and expertise shape climate governance and diplomacy?

3. The 30th Conference of the Parties staged in Belém/Brazil

The live *stage* of diplomatic performance is the COP venue in Belém/Brazil, a city on the edge of the Amazon rainforest. The main stage, known as the "Blue Zone", managed by UNFCCC and only accessible to accredited participants, comprised plenary halls, conference rooms and more than 140 national and thematic pavilions, UN offices, media facilities, and side events (UN Climate Change). The heart of global climate diplomacy was complemented by the "Green Zone", which was open for the public and hosted civil society, businesses, and academics. While this two-tiered setup separated the "actors" and "spectators", the boundaries were blurred by accredited observers. The construction of the *stage* was embedded in a specific Brazilian context involving the development of new infrastructure and the upgrading of existing facilities in Belém. The COP project promised "to create about 5,000 jobs and broader benefits for almost 900 thousand people in this [Amazonian] area" (Sinimbú 2025). Critics have challenged the associated urban transformation dynamics, highlighting the tremendous costs and uneven urban development (Castro *et al.* 2025), including the symbolic paradox of prioritising *development* for a climate summit. Thus, this mega-event was marked by severe public protests, including civil society actors and indigenous representatives who stormed the COP venue. By taking the *stage* and making their voices heard, they mediated their

concerns that urban development was taking precedence over the needs of local communities and their ancestral land rights (Khan 2025). These protests exemplified spectatorship resistance, illustrating how the climate summit becomes a “tool with which those oppressed by injustice and inequality are empowered to take action” (Magellson 2021, 186). They challenged the conventional *development* narrative by presenting alternative perspective based on *rights* and *duty*.

The global event was announced as the “Anniversary COP”, marking tenth anniversary of the legally binding Paris Agreement (UNFCCC 2015), which was adopted at COP21. According to the treaty (Art. 3), the country Parties are required to submit updated *Nationally Determined Contributions* (NDCs) every five years to demonstrate their commitment to reducing national emissions and adapting to climate change. The most recent round, which focused on “targets” for 2035, was due ahead of COP30. However, the Summit got off to a rocky start as only one-third of the parties to the Paris Agreement had announced or submitted their 2035 climate pledges. These pledges covered roughly half of global emissions (Chandrasekhar *et al.* 2025), but not those of the USA – the world’s second largest CO2 emitter (Burck *et al.* 2026), as the country officially withdrew from the Paris Agreement on 20 January 2025 via an Executive Order (White House 2025).

Climate adaptation is interrelated with debates on climate finance that is key for implementing PA’s goal of decarbonising economies, limiting global warming to 1.5-2°C while addressing ecosocial justice. It is also about how financial resources can be translated into climate action in so-called “developing countries”. In this regard, observers at COP30 have argued that dominant climate policies operate under the assumption that the ecological crisis can be resolved by relying on market-based mechanisms as a “solution” (Loureiro 2025), despite the fact that “solutions” need to consider that those who have contributed most to producing the effects of climate change are less exposed to the worst effects and have the greatest capacity to mitigate those consequences (Kaur Paul 2021). Given the huge implementation gap with regard to climate finance under Article 9.1 PA., the UN General Assembly (2024):

notes with concern the continued decline in international financial flows to developing countries in support of clean, sustainable, affordable, reliable, just and inclusive energy transitions, [and] calls upon countries, public and private financial institutions and other stakeholders to scale up the provision of finance.

Addressing the gap in climate finance was a focus of COP29 in Baku in 2024, where the deadline ended to agree on a new global climate-finance target known as the *New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance* (NCQG). Being part of a broader aim to mobilise the envisioned USD 1.3 trillion annually from public and private and blended sources, the NCQG requests “developed countries” to provide at least USD 300 billion annually by 2035, tripling the previous USD 100 billion goal (UNFCCC 2024). The implementation plan for the NCQG, the *Baku to Belém Roadmap to USD 1.3tn*, which was launched at COP29 to define how to achieve the goal by 2035, has become a bone of contention for the COP-Parties, causing disappointment among the *Global South* that view the NCQG’s main target of “at least” UDS 300bn annually as insufficient. Parties and negotiating alliances submitted proposals to the *Baku to Belém consultation process*, outlining missing desired elements for the final roadmap – reflecting countries’ broader

positions on climate finance. The submissions reveal a blurred divide along two major lines: "Developing countries" demanding more grant-based finance and compensation for historically caused damages versus "developed countries" stressing private sector engagement and private-public collaboration (Chandrasekhar *et al.* 2025). It has been argued that this roadmap is a paper tiger because "it mixes international resources with national funds that many countries don't even possess, lacks monitoring mechanisms, and follows the logic of financial capital, which favours low-risk projects with high economic returns" (Loureiro 2025). There is also a lack of binding mechanisms and clarity regarding the origin of resources, as well as vagueness surrounding agreed goals. Moreover, the pivot to private/blended finance is itself a legal-structural choice with distributive implications, not a "neutral" shift in financing but rather a political project that prioritises global finance. One could argue that this choice converts public treaty obligations such as Art. 9.1 Paris Agreement into investable, de-risked assets, demonstrating a shift from state-led lending and conditionality towards a model that seeks to mobilise private finance "investable" for institutional investors. This imports the investment-protection architecture into the climate governance space, socialising risk while privatising return (Gabor 2021) – a facet of *green coloniality* whereby public institutions take on political, currency, and demand risks so that private capital can enter climate-related projects.

Before COP30 began, the *Like-Minded-Development-Countries* bloc (LMDC, 24 countries), including India, China, Saudi Arabia, and the *Arab Group* (22 countries) pushed to insert "implementation guarantees" and stronger accountability into COP's agenda. The COP agenda forms part of the *script* of the climate negotiations functioning as both a roadmap for negotiations and political battleground: According to the UNFCCC's Rules of Procedure, a provisional agenda is drafted after each COP, circulated to all parties and adopted at the ceremonial opening following a series of informal consultations, during which regional groups negotiate the wording and order of items (UNFCCC 1996, r. 9-16). These "informal consultations" often trigger the aforementioned agenda fights. In the run-up to COP30, the *Provisional Agenda COP30* (UN FCCC/PA/CMA/2025/1; 1/Add.1) contained 115 pre-agreed substantive items. LMDC and Arab Group submitted formal amendments (Add.2, Add.3) proposing four new agenda points: "trade-restrictive unilateral measures", ambition and data transparency⁵ and climate finance, together with a supplementary note on "implementation of Article 9(1) of the Paris Agreement" (UNFCCC 2025, par. 18; LMDC and Arab Group 2025). The blocs aimed to elevate finance discussion to the COP plenary, thereby pressuring the *Global North* parties to accelerate promised funding. Aware of these demands, Brazil's COP 30 presidency held pre-session "presidency consultations" to keep the conference on schedule. For example, the senior Brazilian diplomat André Corrêa do Lago urged India (a very vocal spokesperson for "development countries") not to push for Article 9.1 and the carbon-border-adjustment mechanism too strongly, suggesting "alternative" spaces

⁵ The three items relate to: 1) EU's contested *Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism* (CBAM) and represented a renewed attempt of the negotiation group to include CBAM on the agenda - a proposal that had failed in the prior year's negotiations (Gabbatiss and Lempriere 2024); 2.) Climate ambition aims to bridge the gap between NDCs and the actions required to limit global warming to 1.5°C; 3) Data transparency aligns with Paris Agreement's Enhanced Transparency Framework, which mandates systematic reporting on emissions and climate actions by all Parties.

for the demands (Sinha 2025). Ultimately, the parties agreed to remove the four items from the agenda at the COP-Opening, (IISD, 10.11.2025, Opening Ceremony 2025), shifting them to “presidency consultations” (UNFCCC 1996, r.42). By removing the items from the agenda, the obligation to make a decision in 2025 was removed, alleviating the pressure to reach a compromise on the various blocs’ divergent positions and creating a window for mediation instead. This diplomatic manoeuvre meant that the COP30 agenda could be adopted without objection, preserving multilateral momentum while postponing the contentious finance debates.

Anticipating that the compromise might unravel during the negotiations, UNFCCC President Simon Stiell used the ritualised, worldwide-screened COP30 Ceremonial Opening (2025) to remind delegates: “your job here is not fighting against each other, your job here is to fight this climate crisis together”. Nevertheless, this warning did not stop the ensuing “agenda fight”. Although climate finance has been excluded from the official agenda, the issue quickly resurfaced as one of COP30’s central battlegrounds. It exposes a deeper fault line: climate finance now serves as a proxy for the unresolved questions of “climate duty” and “climate debt”, as became evident during the “presidency consultations”. At the start of the COP30, backstage meetings were convened to narrow the differences over the four contested items and to decide how to reintroduce them into the formal negotiation track.

4. An agenda fight performance on climate finance staged as collective therapy

The *Presidency Consultations on NDCs, BTRs, Article 9.1, and UTMs* revealed fundamental discrepancies on all four issues, particularly regarding the implementation of Art. 9.1. At the request of the COP presidency, the written submissions and “bridging proposals” from different negotiation groups and country parties reflected that the *agenda fight* had only been postponed. During the consultations⁶ (IISD 2025), particularly “developing countries”, partly grouped in overlapping alliances, vocally expressed their perceptions of systemic inequality and marginalisation within global climate governance. They often performed the diplomatic role of the “vulnerable states”.

Anticipating a fundamental clash of visions, India in its opening statement, performing the role of a powerful deescalating mediator when speaking for the group of *Like-Minded Developing Countries*, cautioned against changing the Paris Agreement architecture. The representative emphasises that the groups’ proposal on implementing Article 9.1 reinforces “developed nations” legal duty to provide climate finance, and also stressed that implementation must be guided by equity and the *principle of common but differentiated responsibilities [and Respective Capabilities]*. LMDC also proposed a concrete work programme on the relationship between Article 9.1 and other parts of the Paris Agreement.

The following day, the *African Group* took up this proposal and extended it through work on “a burden-sharing arrangement” (IISD 11, 12 November 2025). Representing the *Arab Group*, Saudi Arabia demanding that climate finance be addressed under Art. 9.1, complaining that their core requests had been sidelined, including concrete programmes

⁶ COP30 Presidency Consultations, 11 November 2025; 12 November 2025, 13 November 2025; Informal Stocktaking Plenary 12 November 2025 (author’s recording).

for implementation, which included tripling the financial obligations. The *African group* (AGN, representing all 54 countries) and the *Alliance of Small Island States* (AOSIS, representing 39 small island and low-lying coastal developing countries) also view finance as a cornerstone of NDCs implementation and called for tripling efforts by "developed countries".

In contrast, the diplomatic roles of "developed countries", such as the European Union (EU, 27 member states), Norway and Japan, acknowledged the need for climate finance and including reaffirmed commitment to deliver on the NCQG, but framed implementation largely in terms of on "voluntary" obligations and the importance of private finance. They refused to discuss the omitted agenda item of "unilateral trade measures" within the UNFCCC framework, arguing the *World Trade Organisation* should deal with this issue to avoid duplication of work. One could argue that this reflects a forum-shifting strategy to diminish the relevance of CBDR-RC⁷. The online screening of this confrontational debate ended abruptly after thirty minutes.⁸

The *agenda fight* was also evident during the subsequent press conference,⁹ where *spectators*, i.e. observers and journalists, asked questions about the presidency consultation. The COP30 Presidency presented the consultations as a constructive dialogue "in the spirit of *mutirão*", offering a safe space. Accredited media outlets expressed sympathy for the demands of the "developing countries" regarding the four issues and pressed for answers on the controversial financing. They asked how the COP could ensure that climate finance would not lead to a "debt trap", highlighting the risk of countries accumulating unsustainable levels of debt through credit-based climate finance and the associated conditions and political influence this entail. This concern is grounded in contested climate-finance accounting methodology: concessional loans that are counted as climate finance can exacerbate sovereign debt distress, and there is no agreed grant-equivalence standard to distinguish loan-based from grant-based support. Unfortunately, this question remained unanswered, with the COP presidency responding that "the finance COP was Baku".

The confrontational start of the *agenda fight* performance continued at the subsequent meeting the following day.¹⁰ This time, the consultation was chaired by COP30 president's strategist, Túlio Andrade. In an attempt to facilitate smooth negotiations, Andrade performed the role of an empathic moderator and mediator, announcing a united celebration of the tenth anniversary, multilateralism, cooperation and solidarity. He invited the parties to participate in a "collective therapy session" to assess the current state of the debate. He announced that the idea was to provide a safe space to build trust and encourage the parties to adhere to the collective effort principle of *mutirão*. Declaring the contentious negotiations on Art. 9.1 Paris Agreement a "collective therapy" must not be interpreted metaphorically in the context of international climate negotiations alone. To avoid getting caught up in negotiation cycles, it is important to consider the

⁷ This is where climate law and trade law conflict, particularly around EU measures such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which must comply with WTO non-discrimination rules and Article XX exceptions. In contrast, the principle of CBDR-RC has no equivalent in WTO law.

⁸ COP Presidency Consultations, 11 November 2025 (author's recording).

⁹ COP 30 Presidency Thematic Press Conference, 12 November 2025 (author's recording).

¹⁰ COP30 Presidency Consultations, 13 November 2025 (author's recording).

psychological makeup of all parties involved and to employ psychological techniques. For example, “allow[ing] the other side to steam off” provides people with psychological release through the simple process of recounting their grievances’ (Fisher and Ury 2012, 19). Behaviour management requires the chairperson or mediator to have psychological competence and diplomatic skills, and the ability to apply effectively techniques (Cohen 2002). Equipped with skills such as active listening, the COP30 strategist’s use of the therapeutic concept can be considered as a deliberate choice taken from the psychoanalytically informed diplomacy toolkit for tackling severe intergroup psychological challenges. Intergroup conflict resolution utilises similar principles to those of therapy groups to navigate the psychological dynamics of intractable disputes and negotiate loopholes in seemingly irreconcilable positions. The aim is to foster trust and facilitate dialogue and concession between conflicting parties.

5. An antagonistic play of a collective therapy session

The idea of a *collective therapy session* prompted a theatrical response from the negotiating blocs, who employed therapeutic metaphors and language in their *roles*. This “presidency consultation” therapy session was attended by more than thirty negotiating parties, blocs and observers. They presented various positions, thereby demonstrating a divide between the *Global North* and the *Global South*, albeit with blurred boundaries. The following observed sequence will highlight some of the most vocal participants, their arguments and alliances, and thus exemplify the divergent performances during this session:¹¹

The *Arab Group* made the opening statement, which set the tone for the entire session. This bloc did not seem keen on the idea of a therapeutic session, stating that: “rather than the collective therapy session, many members of our group [...] want to present a vision of where our work can move after the discussion that we have been having”. The group’s representative suggested, despite the tension surrounding the advancement of equitable climate finance under Article 9.1, to move forward with emphasis on international cooperation, socioeconomic impact assessments of climate policies and a dialogue mechanism involving official notices. He also addressed the elephant of room in climate discourse: power imbalances, which make consensus difficult to achieve. A major challenge therefore is to reconcile opposing interests, address historical inequities, and ensure that negotiations result in tangible, equitable outcomes.

In contrast, the *African group* emphasised the need to “reflect on the very collective therapy session”, because “a clarity on the way forward” from the COP30 presidency is missing. The group’s representative stressed the expectation of transparent presidential guidance on next steps, of open dialogue and rejected artificial separations between substantive and procedural discussions. Proposals must be anchored in existing frameworks rather than requiring new agenda items. The group prioritised procedural clarity and inclusive engagement over immediate substantive compromises, framing these as key to enabling implementation and equity. Rather than seeking a quick result, they advocated a process-oriented approach. For this approach to be successful in a multilateral context, everyone must participate and power issues must be addressed.

¹¹ COP30 Presidency Consultations, 13 November 2025 (author’s recording).

Both the *Arab group* and *African group* emphasised systemic changes to address power imbalances.

The *Alliance of Latin America and the Caribbean* (AILAC, representing eight countries), also called for clear guardrails to be established for negotiations, ensuring that discussions remain constructive and transparent within the scope of the four specified agenda items.

The *Like-Minded Developing Countries*, welcomed the *therapy session* and suggested that this notion even "should become mandatory and not voluntary". The therapeutic imagery was utilised to refocus the discussion on climate finance, rhetorically pitting "voluntary" versus "obligatory". The representative pointed out that "finance is not available in the kind of quantum that is required for developing countries to take that action on their own". By highlighting the lack of climate finance as a systemic barrier to climate action, the group demanded that "developed countries" fulfil their Article 9.1 obligations. LMDC also emphasised the need for a climate governance to address historical emissions and exploitation, and restructuring power dynamics to prioritise the *just* dimension over *Global North* interests. One can say that LMDC's representative translated the "collective therapy" metaphor into a demand for systemic healing that would require addressing historical and ongoing responsibilities to move beyond symbolic dialogue. The core argument is clear: without redistributive finance, climate action will remain a tool of domination rather than cooperation.

South Africa acknowledged its engagement in this collective therapy session, stating that "without adequate resources, we cannot achieve the level of ambition that we need to achieve collectively". The representative argued that climate finance is essential for scaling up action without exacerbating debt and fiscal burdens of developing countries. Without adequate and accountable finance, the Paris Agreement's ambition cannot be realised.

Similarly, the spokesperson for *Least Developed Countries* (LDC, 45 countries), from Nepal, addressed the inadequate financing tools used, but agreed to generalise a therapeutic approach, emphasising the own origin – "a place where the meditation, compassion and healing tradition began". LDC emphasised agency and the value of local knowledge systems beyond conventional negotiation approaches, and condemned the lack of action regarding the four issues. They thereby refused to perform the role of the "vulnerable states" or "recipients" of finance.

China's performance showed empathy towards the demands of the *Global South*, emphasising the long-standing Eurocentric knowledge hegemony. While welcoming a "collective therapy session", the representative dramatically called for greater specificity, asking whether it would be a "shock therapy" or a "love therapy": "We would like to continue the dialogue without prejudging whether it will lead to marriage or divorce". The metaphorical use of the terms "marriage" and "divorce" seems to reflect contemporary tense geopolitical situation in the multilateral negotiations, with the indirect threat of opting out and "love therapy" as a means of maintaining unity. Performing the role of a responsible great power, *China* provided food for thought by urging that "we need to be very clear about the cause of the symptom or the cause of the disease in order to better understand the reason for the gaps".

The representative addressed a root cause of the therapy very bluntly:

And the third element is that *why* we have this therapy, because some very classic medicine or Medicare formats approaches cannot work since the industrial revolution. Therefore, we need to find maybe some Asia, Indian, Africa, Brazil, Latin American herbs and some massages, some yoga to help us cure our disease. I think, the herb, the massage, the yoga actually is the enabler (...) my suggestion is that since it is a therapy, the doctors should hear the patients to talk as much as they can.

The various positions of the “developing countries” reflected the idea of *collective therapy*, but emphasised its inadequacy in the absence of action. They noted that therapy risks becoming merely a space for venting without addressing power imbalances. They called for *Global South*-needs to be prioritised arguing that the international principle of CBDR-RC has been ignored. Art. 2(2) of the Paris Agreement stipulates that implementation must “reflect equity and the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances”, guiding all actions including NDCs and finance. The *Arab Group* specifically criticised the COP presidency for framing structural issues as “feelings” rather than “facts” – thereby pointing to epistemic injustice and hegemonic emotional economy. Thus, the therapeutic notion has been seen as a critique of performative “Southern” allyship, demanding tangible outcomes over symbolic dialogue. By contrast, the *European Union’s* position, viewed the “collective therapy” as a means of maintaining consensus and avoiding confrontations over entrenched asymmetric power hierarchies in climate negotiations. The EU used the term therapy technically, referring to its fundamentals: active listening and constructive dialogue. In that spirit, this negotiation bloc rejected proposals that repackage existing themes (such as Art. 9.1) into separate agenda items. The group urged for caution regarding process reforms and expressed scepticism that structural changes would respect national sovereignty, policy autonomy, or existing frameworks. The representative argued for keeping the status quo, because reforms would risk “distorting” agreed-upon processes, prioritising (perceived) multilateral harmony. By framing the negotiation session as a space for listening and empathy, the group emphasised that the “therapy” must respect existing agreements. This focus on preserving procedural and policy autonomy contrasted with calls from the *Global South* for structural adjustments to ensure equity and concrete outcomes. The EU’s stance, to some extent, reflected a defensive attitude towards protecting existing governance arrangements, thereby resisting demands for redistributive justice. In a similar vein, *Norway* stated that “the point just made by the *European Union* is a valid one”.

Echoing the stance of the *Global North*, the *United Kingdom* (UK), also emphasised the need for international cooperation, arguing that the therapy session reflects a cautious, procedural stance that prioritises balancing international cooperation with national sovereignty. In an effort to perform a mediating role, the UK acknowledged “tension between two core concepts”, but reminded the Parties:

when talking about implementation and cooperation and learning from each other, that’s the basis of a good marriage. But I am a bit worried that some of the proposals are starting to become unclear to us on how they will add value, on how they will build and support our fruitful marriage here. And some of the proposals, if we take them through to their logical conclusions, start to sound like they could take us beyond a

collective response, including some new items and ideas here around burden sharing on finance.¹²

The *United Kingdom* position also prioritised procedural stability and sovereignty over transformative change, translating the idea of therapy into a tool for dialogue. This position reveals a reluctance to make binding finance commitments beyond the need for cooperation.

These *Global North* positions prompted again *Global South* negotiators to return to the stage: For example, *Kuwait* expressed support for the statement made by the *Arab group* regarding the need to uphold Art. 9.1 PA. *Palestine* also highlighted the gap between climate commitments and financial delivery under PA over the past decade. The representative argued that unfulfilled financial promises, including the lack of a clear mechanism to channel funds to “developing countries”, undermine both climate action and national development. In line with the *Arab group*, the representative stressed the importance of transparent, results-based financing pathway linked to NDCs, thereby advocating for Art. 9.1 PA to be treated as a distinct priority. The country group performed a call of equitable support for “vulnerable countries”, contrasting with the EU’s focus on procedural sovereignty.

Moreover, the AOSIS representative criticised partly contradictory positions among [*Global North*] parties – such as advocating for 1.5°C ambition in some forums but undermine it in others. The group also stressed the importance of a dedicated space to address Article 9.1 to ensure accountability for funding NDCs and adaptation plans. Finally, frustrations over inconsistent support for the NCQG framework was expressed and called for burden-sharing.

Following the back-and-forth of the debate between the camps, the *African Group* took the floor again, this time expressing considerable scepticism about continuing with this “therapy”. The representative declared: “I am not in need of a therapy session, but happy to contribute as long as you are not freezing or heating too much the room”.

The *Marshall Island* brought the argument to the very point: “we can’t implement without money. And for us, that means grant-based finance”. This addressed the problem of *debt* in climate finance, attributed to historical responsibility of “developed countries” as well as the effects of (concessional) loans in “developing countries”. This aligned with *South Africa’s* argument that the “provision of finance is the catalyst in scaling up action”, ensuring that “we do not place further constraints on the debt levels and fiscal sustainability in developing countries”. *Egypt* emphasised the often-veiled issue: “The provision of finance is the catalyst in scaling up action in such a way that we do not place further constraints on the debt levels and fiscal sustainability in developing countries”. They expressed the risk associated with the continuation of “debt diplomacy” under a *green veneer*.

The *Arab group* took the floor once again. The speaker critiqued how global negotiations often function as one-sided therapy sessions: developing countries are permitted to “talk”, to express their grievances and feelings, but their substantive concerns receive no meaningful response. The metaphor of therapy – “they just respond with questions” – captures a sense of procedural empathy masking structural disregard. The speaker

¹² COP30 Presidency Consultations, 13 November 2025 (author’s recording).

contrasted the “Western” concept of “marriage” (symbolising equality between partners) with the speaker’s preferred metaphor of “extended family”, emphasising asymmetry, interdependence and differentiated responsibilities among states. This tied into the argument that “developed” and “developing” countries occupy unequal positions within the multilateral system.

It can be argued that the various *Global South* positions prioritised obligatory and concrete outcomes regarding finance. Ultimately, the plea was both procedural (“we will not allow our voices to be silenced”) and substantive (“Article 9.1 is absolutely necessary”), reclaiming agency within a governance system that has since long marginalised the *Global South*’s realities under the guise of technocratic process.

Finally, the COP30 Presidency strategist closed “the collective therapy session” by introducing guardrails for future work including: “preserving the Paris Agreement architecture and policy cycle; constructive and respectful engagement on issues related to the four issues, meaning no finger pointing; preserving the nationally determined nature of nationally determined contributions” (IISD 13.11.2025).

6. Therapeutic rhetoric in context

The *collective-therapy* approach functions as a discursive device that reshapes the logic of interaction among the delegations. By encouraging delegates to express feelings and share experiences, it shifts the conversation away from the language of bargaining or sovereignty, which typically characterises climate diplomacy. In this way, the therapeutic framing not only sets the tone of the proceedings and expands the agenda to include affective claims that would otherwise remain invisible. It allows grievances that are difficult to articulate within a strictly technical discourse to be voiced. The metaphor also invites performative gestures, as observed in the session’s theatrical elements. While these elements can make the meeting “feel” more inclusive, they risk obscuring underlying power imbalances. When the session is staged as therapy, overt markers of hierarchy are softened and the focus shifts to shared vulnerability. The audience is encouraged to interpret the spectacle as a space of equality, even though structural hierarchies may persist.

Moreover, calling the climate finance negotiations as a *therapy session* reflects the intricate relationship between progress and stagnation, yielding ambiguous yet potentially constructive outcomes. This framing is neither uncooperative nor transformative, rather, it echoes the performance of strategic grievance-expression roles by “developing countries” to pressure “developed countries” for non-delivery of tangible outcomes. While this may delay concrete action, it also creates space for future negotiations. On the one hand, the therapeutic metaphor risks becoming a rhetorical device used to avoid taking action, prioritising dialogue over deliverables. Conversely, “developing countries” have argued that existing procedural frameworks delay accountability for Article 9.1. The rhetoric of the *Global North* regarding “listening” and “trust-building” risks concealing a reluctance to commit to binding obligations, thereby perpetuating inequities. The negotiations revealed a clash between, on the one hand, efforts to preserve the status quo framework, which prioritises procedural stability, and, on the other hand, demands to de-centre climate governance, with a focus on equity, finance, and accountability. The positioning of finance in relation to Art. 9(1) of the Paris

Agreement exposes the "colonial matrix of power" (Quijano 2000) underpinning climate negotiations. Metaphors such as "marriage", "extended family" and "divorce" reveal the limits of the "false universalism of *liberal* internationalism" (Koskenniemi 2009). The promise of equality among sovereign states ("marriage") is replaced by a reality of dependency ("family"). The possibility of "divorce" further gestures to the fragility and conditionality of these arrangements, including the option of withdrawal. These metaphors can be read alongside Koskenniemi's (2009) analysis of the tensions between sovereignty versus community: a discourse that cannot settle at either pole without collapsing into "apology" or "utopia". It also resonates with analysis of the "emotional economy" of colonial domination by scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2017, 42, 90, 151f), who argue that hegemonic powers often retranslate South's demands as "feelings", emotional or identity-based instead of fact-based calls for structural change in the broader frame of "care". This *Othering* sentimentalises rather than institutionalises key demands. One can say that the speech acts use affect (therapy, empathy, family) as a rhetorical critique of global inequality, exposing how postcolonial subordination is reproduced through procedural liberalism and economic "green" measures that perpetuate dependency under the guise of climate justice.

Overall, the therapeutic approach risks masking power imbalances, allowing heavy industrialised countries, including former colonial powers, to sidestep historical responsibilities. EU's emphasis on "no finger-pointing" and preserving sovereignty norms (e.g., opposing standalone agenda items for Art. 9.1) could shield them from scrutiny over underfunding. Nevertheless, this approach created a "safe space" for voicing systemic grievances, such as finance shortfalls. This visibility could pressure "developed countries" to acknowledge their obligations. Examples of this include Arab Group's demand for a "COP of truth" or LMDC's insistence on implementing Article 9.1. Such expressions could lay the groundwork for future compromises by establishing a shared recognition of inequities. Although no binding agreements were expected during the "presidential consultations", procedural steps were taken: including establishment of guardrails to structure future talks and setting up a working group on Article 9.1.

However, the success of the "therapy" hinges on whether it will enable structural reforms or perpetuate established power hierarchies. "Developing countries" have framed their demands as redress for historical exploitation (e.g. finance as "debt" for colonial resource extraction). The establishment of a working group on Article 9.1 with enforceable accountability measures could signal progress. However, performative dialogue without binding commitment risks reinforcing *Global North* dominance and remaining merely aspirational. Moving forward collectively might also depend on whether these mechanisms evolve into accountable, equity-driven processes, or if they remain spaces for evading responsibility under Article 9.1., including discussions on loss and damage, etc. Depending on whether these commitments are translated into binding agreements at subsequent COPs, the rhetoric of therapy could either catalyse change by centring marginalised voices, or it could become a smokescreen for inaction.

One could argue that the therapeutic rhetoric risks becoming an expression of procrastination and opacity, as the Parties could present their grievances as an end result instead of genuinely compromising. Alternatively, maybe expressing grievance is

already the first genuine step towards reaching at least a *processual* agreement on continuing the talks by institutionalising them in a working group on climate finance to discuss modalities of how to implement Art. 9.1. for the next two years. The climate finance obligations of Art. 9.1 will probably be central at COP32, to be held in Addis Ababa in 2027. It remains to be seen how the Ethiopian COP presidency will approach this contentious issue diplomatically. This “agenda fight” has once again demonstrated that finance remains the “traditional dividing line in climate negotiations”, with a “lack of funding is poisoning the entire COP” (Garric and Mouterde 2025).

7. The *Princípio Mutirão* as performative tool to decentre climate politics?

The finance negotiations at COP30 reveal how global governance reproduces knowledge hierarchies through discourse and institutional form. The “therapy” metaphor evokes a well-known colonial paternalism: whereby the *North* listens to the *South’s* suffering and offer empathy, thereby maintaining power without conceding structural change. Paradoxically, it was the Brazilian COP presidency – rather than the *Northern* blocs - that employed this psychotherapeutic tool from the diplomacy toolkit to manage intergroup grievances. This reveals its limits of the tool in an arena that still privileges Anglo-Eurocentric norms. Achille Mbembe (2015, 18) has critiqued epistemic coloniality as “the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions; are produced nearly always by Europeans or Euro-American men who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality [...] a process that never fully acknowledges these Others as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects”. The transnational governance elites, credentialed through “Western” degrees and English-language proficiency, function as an intermediary class within bodies such as the UN. This elite stabilises existing hierarchies, sustaining contemporary domination less through overt coercion than through epistemic dependency and structural continuities. Sociolegal scholarship has long demonstrated that international law and UN frameworks largely reflect “Western” notions of negotiation, mediation and treaty-making (Seidel 2025, 1697, 1699). Global climate diplomacy thus remains rooted in Anglo-Eurocentric traditions and *liberal* mediation theory, often overlooking entrenched knowledge hierarchies. A fatal assumption persists:

the West is the legitimate legislator and adjudicator of values, norms and institutions for the ‘international community’ and that those (presumed) incapable of producing good government, good laws, and good morals should obey the moral order bequeathed to them by the West, as a matter of defence (Grovogui 2006, 31).

The belief that only Anglo-European knowledge can solve global challenges perpetuates ideas of “modernity” and “progress,” while marginalising local and Indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms. The result is a global knowledge system that both bridges and reinforces a *North-South* divide: a cadre trained in *Northern* epistemologies navigates geopolitical fractures without disturbing the underlying hierarchy that determines what counts as legitimate knowledge. These structures reproduce the very diplomatic grammar that Mbembe (2017) identifies as carriers of epistemic dominance. *Northern* diplomatic formats mask structural inequalities rather than decolonise the terms of climate negotiation. This limits a genuine inclusion of multiple perspectives since the established canon and tools reflect specific sociocultural backgrounds that tend to marginalise “alternative” knowledges. As Seth (2011, 183) notes,

for 'the international' is a realm where endless and seemingly irresolvable contestations – over meanings and morals as much as resources and power – testify to the fact that few things have become so naturalised that they are not potentially subject to contestation, few presumptions so stabilised that they are not periodically destabilised.

Eurocentric frameworks have entrenched path dependencies through the systematic hierarchisation of differences, turning *othering* into an instrument of power, deeply intertwined with colonial and development discourses. In an attempt to break this pattern, the Brazilian COP30 presidency deliberately invoked the *mutirão* principle – a collective, community-based practice of reciprocal labour with roots in Indigenous and local Brazilian knowledge. By foregrounding *mutirão*, the Latin-American COP30 host sought to decentre established diplomatic format and introduce *Global South* diplomatic knowledge to the international stage, thereby expanding the canon. This can be interpreted as a form of resistance to hegemonic frameworks, seeking to facilitate cooperative negotiations on an equal footing. Appropriating Indigenous concepts can enrich diplomatic discourse with perspectives of collective stewardship and solidarity. However, such cooptation risks stripping the practice of its sociocultural context, turning lived relational practices into symbolic rhetoric that ultimately reinforces power asymmetries. Utilising the *mutirão* script allowed reframing leadership as a convenor of a collective effort, inviting for collaboration on common climate burden. That is why, at COP30's opening ceremony, the Brazilian presidency invited the international community to join a *global mutirão* – or "a global effort of cooperation among peoples for the progress of humanity" (COP30 Presidency 2025).

8. A *Global Mutirão Decision* and the unfinished agenda of climate justice at COP30

The COP30 website (2025c) presents the summit's outcome as a "landmark achievement" amidst "unprecedented geopolitical tensions", stating that it "successfully balanced forces between *North* and *South*, 'developed' and 'developing' countries, energy and nature, technology and people, commitments and implementation, mitigation and adaptation". However, the terms "success" and "failure" remain highly controversial and depend on perspective.

Notably, the *Global Mutirão Decision* (UNFCCC 2025) was made at the end of the two-weeks COP30 negotiations. This followed a proposal by the Brazilian COP30 Presidency to address the four contentious issues removed from the COP30 agenda, including the here discussed provision of climate finance by "developed countries" under Article 9.1 of the Paris Agreement. The *Mutirão* decision marked a pivotal moment in the negotiations as it paved the way for a procedural consensus on these issues to guide the future COPs. However, critics have noted that the decision merely launched a two-year work programme on Article 9 (UNFCCC 2025, par. 54), representing a weak compromise favouring an earlier EU proposal (Schalatek *et al.* 2025). While this approach temporarily deflected conflicts, it emphasised that climate negotiations are a ritual of controlled disagreement rather than a process for building genuine consensus. This reflects the common problem of "indeterminacy" (Koskeniemi 2009) in international law. The oscillation between nationally sovereign policy autonomy and international binding obligation is a fundamental aspect of international legal argument, rather than a contingent feature of COP theatre.

The theatrical negotiation dynamics at COP30 revealed how debates over finance mirrored a broader struggle for climate responsibility, as well as resistance to *green colonialism* – a phenomenon where climate action and governance frameworks risk perpetuating extractive patterns under a “green” guise. This resistance was evident not only among the *spectators*, where tCOP30 was accompanied by severe civil society protest but also by COP parties, predominantly from “developing countries”, in the official negotiation arena, despite the utilisation of the indigenous-inspired concept *mutirão* as negotiation tool. This article argues that COP30’s “failure” to address climate finance as an obligatory *duty* and *debt* (rather than a technical “target”) is not an anomaly but the logical outcome of an international governance system structured around *North-South* asymmetries. The summit’s performative diplomacy enabled the *Global North* to evade accountability for past actions, while the *Global South* advocated for binding financial commitments under Article 9.1. “Developed countries” watered down language urging “all countries in a position to contribute and rely on private sector mobilisation to fill financing gaps” (Schalatek 2025). The COP30 Presidency’s proposal calls for efforts to at least triple adaptation finance by 2035, urging “developed countries” to increase their financial commitments (UNFCCC 2025, par.53), while acknowledging past underperformance and setting new, albeit still insufficient, benchmarks. Nevertheless, the *Mutirão decision* lacks concrete goals, timelines, or assigned responsibilities, prompting “developing countries” to merely “note” the outcome rather than endorse it (Schalatek 2025). The Climate Summit’s “agenda fight” was therefore not a procedural hiccup; it is a symptom of a governance system in trouble. The apparent therapeutic turn in climate diplomacy risks depoliticising climate responsibility. One could argue that the *Principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities*, as vocally set out by “developing” countries, is the legal hinge. Although the Paris Agreement softens differentiation through the phrase “in the light of different national circumstances” (Art. 2.2, 4.3), this self-differentiation arguably creates the ambiguity, allowing “developed” parties to reframe Article 9.1 obligations as *voluntary* contributions. This doctrinal shift provides the legal mechanism for the *therapeutic* depoliticisation described here.

Therapeutic rhetoric and theatrical negotiations not only express confrontational divisions, but also prevent addressing fundamental questions of *green colonialism* underlying climate negotiations. Therefore, if international climate policy continues to promote solutions such as carbon dioxide removal, carbon markets and so-called nature-based solutions without explicitly addressing the root causes of climate change or providing redistributive climate finance, the COPs well-intended roadmaps, programmes and action plans will remain insufficient. One could therefore argue that a COP’s ability to transcend therapeutic theatre depends on the emergence of a strong counter-framing that reintroduces power-laden vocabularies, such as critiques of *green colonialism*. This would serve to re-politicise the therapeutic space, pulling the discussion back towards structural critique and institutionalising it. To shift from symbolic healing to material redistribution, the dominant negotiating blocs must demonstrate political willingness to tolerate dissent without immediately reasserting a technocratic framework. This requires empathy to be translated into concrete policy commitments and financial concessions, and meaningful compensation for *loss and damage* – a topic that requires further exploration.

The way we name and talk about climate cooperation matters. The way in which it is conceptualised and lived – as therapy, a strategy, a right or a duty – shapes both COPs theatricality of negotiations and the distribution of power beneath them. COP30 revealed a profound paradox: the very mechanisms designed to implement the Paris Agreement (finance targets, adaptation indicators, carbon markets) are ineffective due to a lack of judiciability and the power structures that govern their design. COP30's Presidency Consultations, touted as "collective therapy", were diplomatic theatre – a space to manage conflict without resolving it. As the climate summit progressed, the USD1.3 trillion climate finance target, the adaptation indicators framework, and the carbon markets negotiations all became entangled in this unresolved power struggle. To move beyond the status quo, it is crucial that climate diplomacy engages with the legal and ethical foundations of climate finance – viewing it not as a technical challenge, but as a fundamental matter of historical justice. As Gurminder K. Bhambra and Peter Newell (2023, 181) analysed "recognising the patterns of political economic development that produce the global inequalities associated with climate change undermines the possibility of developing effective and socially just political solutions to the problems we face".

The unfinished COP30 also reflects deeper *uncertainties* about advancing the global climate change agenda, particularly in light of the absence of a major economic and geopolitical force from this year's negotiation table. By officially withdrawing from the Paris Agreement and 66 international organisations (White House 2025, 2026), the USA seems to promote a bilateralism-first approach that challenges these historic multilateral institutions. This has created a *climate governance uncertainty*, destabilising the procedural continuity and future financial backbone of the COP. However, this disruption also has the potential to dismantle the entrenched power hierarchies that often stifle ambition. Without the United States at the direct negotiating table (structural power, the remaining parties lose a familiar anchor for consensus-building, and the COPs' procedural rhythm is disrupted. The institutional momentum that normally propels the COP forward stalls, timelines for adopting rules become uncertain, and the process's credibility is called into question, as one of the world's largest emitters appears disengaged from the collective effort. This rupture can be seen as weakening the normative pressure on other states to increase their ambition, given that the United States used to often set the benchmark for what was politically feasible in a high-emission context. Conversely, the vacuum left by the United States could be viewed as a political opportunity, prompting calls for novel leadership configurations to emerge and foster climate ambition (Beardsworth 2025). When a dominant player steps back, the balance of power within the COP shifts, enabling marginalised voices, including those of "developing countries" and "small island states", to exert greater influence over the agenda. The absence of a powerful actor that traditionally pushes for compromise-oriented outcomes can embolden coalitions to propose bolder mitigation targets, stronger loss-and-damage mechanisms, or more ambitious finance commitments, as was seen during the Presidential Consultations. The United States' withdrawal forces other major emitters, such as the European Union, China and India, to fill the leadership void, as was also evident during the climate finance debate. Diffusing responsibility among a wider range of actors reduces the perception that climate governance is an Anglo-Euro-centric project, which could increase

the legitimacy of the global climate regime in the eyes of the *Global South* by fostering a more inclusive architecture.

In an immediate reaction to the US's termination of the Paris Agreement, which will not take effect until one year after notification (UNFCCC 2015, Art. 28(2)), and its boycott of COP30 in Brazil, an environment of *non-consensus* building has been created. This *environment of uncertainty* was not conducive to reaching binding agreements, prompting diplomats to delay rather than take decisive action. This withdrawal has disrupted the momentum of "business as usual", creating political space and revealing a temporary state of uncertainty, which exposes a broader legitimacy challenge in climate negotiations. COP30 revealed the underlying power structure in climate diplomacy – often obscured by the formal *roles* of negotiating parties and the procedural and substantive *scripts* of the UN process. The "agenda fight" was merely one manifestation of this rupture. Despite Brazilian enormous diplomatic efforts, the Summit could only be said to have "failed" in terms of institutionalising a duty-based understanding of climate finance implementation. Whether this *uncertainty* will lead to a catalyst for transformative change depends on how effectively negotiation parties can mobilise to fill the gap and re-establish a forward-moving negotiation process for the upcoming COPs.

As the contested finance issue has been postponed to COP32, which Ethiopia will host in 2027, aligning with the timeframe allocated to the newly established working group on this issue, one could argue that this deferral is strategic. Hosting COP32 will give Ethiopia and the African regional group for a diplomatic opportunity to promote a more "transformative paradigm" (Newell 2025). Such transformational change requires moving beyond the Westphalian model of state-centred participation in climate governance and reconceptualise climate finance as not merely a policy instrument, but a collective *human duty*. It also requires expanding climate justice beyond distributive and reparative dimensions to embrace restorative frameworks. This integrated approach would prioritise responsibility for past and ongoing emissions, ensure fair resource allocation in light of disproportionate burden of climate risks, pursue ecological restoration of Earth systems, rethink human-nature interrelationships, and enable genuine participatory governance in climate decision-making. It would explicitly address historical emissions and systemic inequalities through accountability and structural transformation, challenging the traditional focus on compensation alone by alone by clarifying the critical legal distinction between *duty*, *debt*, and *targets*. *Duty* points to a primary obligation under Art. 9.1 – the legal duty of "developed" states to provide climate finance to "developing" states. *Debt* refers to a secondary obligation of reparation, invoking state responsibility for historical emissions as internationally wrongful conduct. The latter is legally heavier, more demanding, and far more contested. "Target" depoliticises both by reframing obligations as managerial metrics. Opening the Pandora's box by clarifying that the reparations (*debt*) framing is legally stronger than the *duty* framing makes it explicit what the COP30 Presidency might wanted to shield: the shift from a technical responsibility to contested *climate debt*. This approach would require reimagining global climate governance so that equity and historical responsibility become core elements of "intergenerational ethics" (Gardiner 2013). Therefore, meaningful climate justice demands dismantling the epistemic and

institutional architectures that render *climate debt* invisible, rather than perfecting the theatrical performances that currently dominate international climate negotiations.

The COP30 *mutirão* initiative brought the principle of mutual aid to the diplomatic arena, offering the prospect of climate action grounded in collective solidarity and relationality. However, it simultaneously reveals the dangers of epistemic extraction, whereby a *living* social practice is translated into a symbolic diplomatic tool within state-centric negotiations, losing its socio-political grounding. There is a risk of treating Indigenous peoples and local communities as *spectators* rather than co-designers of climate policy. In this sense, the *mutirão* initiative risks functioning as a form of epistemic appropriation that obscures enduring asymmetries in global climate governance, where Indigenous peoples and local communities remain positioned as *spectators* within recognition policies rather than *actors* of norm creation. To genuinely engage Indigenous peoples and local communities in the negotiating cycle, it is crucial not only to move beyond instrumental cooptation of Indigenous concepts into state-led negotiation frameworks, but also to ensure comprehensive involvement in the process itself as co-constitutive actors. This would enable the collaborative co-production of needs-based, justice-oriented financing strategies, grounded in situated knowledge and lived experience. This requires structural reforms, such as formal agenda-setting rights for local actors, co-chairing arrangements in climate finance negotiations, and a grant-based, community-controlled climate finance mechanism that recognises non-monetary contributions and resists the logics of debt-making and financialisation. This would signal a move towards genuine pluralised forms of climate governance that acknowledge multiple overlapping normative orders and challenge the hegemony of state-centric legal frameworks. It would transform COP's theatrical collective therapy rhetoric into a people-centred platform for equitable, need-based climate governance. In this regard, the UNFCCC's *Local Communities and Indigenous Peoples Platform* represents, which could not be covered by this paper, represents a potentially significant yet underexamined institutional site. Although the platform aims to integrate diverse knowledge systems, including Indigenous and local knowledge, into climate policy (UNFCCC-LCIPP 2026),¹³ it remains embedded within what can be understood as a dominant statist epistemology. Its structure reproduces the hierarchies that underpin most UNFCCC mechanisms: decision-making authority is concentrated in national delegations, non-state actors largely occupy consultative or observer roles, and Indigenous peoples are not guaranteed autonomous representation. This institutional design constrains the recognition of multiple coexisting normative orders and may perpetuate epistemic hierarchies that render alternative ontologies and collective stewardship practices – including the *mutirão* ethic – partial, translated, or invisible within formal governance processes.

Lessons learned from COP30 could inform a decisive shift from therapeutic rhetoric to structural justice. Rather than focusing on *conflict management*, the way forward is to dismantle the power asymmetries that make conflict inevitable. This includes adopting relational ontological and epistemic perspectives on financialisation such as shifting from extractive to regenerative capital, in order to address climate and biodiversity loss (Arjaliès and Banerjee 2024). This could help to prevent a situation in which climate

¹³ See: <https://lcipp.unfccc.int/>

governance and diplomacy from “deepen[ing] the regulation and spread of mechanisms for the financialization of nature, without tackling the structural causes of the climate crisis” (Loureiro 2025).

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Appendix

COP30 Ceremonial Opening, 10 November 2025 [Video Recording], author's unpublished recording.

COP30 Informal Stocktaking Plenary 12.11.2025 [Video Recording], author's unpublished recording and transcript.

COP30 Presidency Consultation on NDC, BTRs, Art. 9.1 and UTM, 11 November 2025, 12 November 2025, 13 November 2025 [Video Recordings], author's unpublished recordings and transcripts.

COP30 Presidency Thematic Press Conference 12 November, [Video Recording], author's unpublished recording and transcript.