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Mission possible?

COP31 does not need groundbreaking new agreements. What matters is that existing promises are finally turned into action

COP31, the climate conference currently underway in Antalya, is taking place at a difficult time for international climate diplomacy. Geopolitical conflicts and the US withdrawal are making multilateral cooperation more difficult. At the same time, the climate crisis is intensifying and exceeding the 1.5°C threshold is becoming increasingly inevitable. In the United States, climate protection measures are being rolled back and scientific findings called into question. Elsewhere, too, fossil fuels are experiencing a resurgence. And while the funding needed for climate action continues to grow, public spending is being cut.

Nevertheless, the global expansion of renewable energy offers hope. It is transforming energy systems and creating new economic opportunities. The 2015 Paris Agreement also remains a historic achievement. It established a common framework in which almost all countries committed themselves to tackling climate change.

Those expecting the next historic breakthrough from COP31 in Turkey are overlooking its real purpose. At a time of geopolitical conflict, the conference must above all demonstrate that international climate policy is still capable of delivering results — and that long-agreed goals are finally being translated into concrete action.

Many opportunities aside new agreements

The basic rules of the Paris Agreement have largely been negotiated. The central task, therefore, is not to announce new targets. Rather, COP31 must drive progress towards existing goals, monitor their implementation, generate political pressure and demonstrate that the international community remains committed to a common course on climate action. If consensus-based negotiations fail to move forward quickly enough, coalitions of the willing must take the lead — not as an

alternative to UN climate negotiations, but as a meaningful complement to the multilateral process.

COP31 also offers an opportunity to strengthen cooperation with middle powers such as Turkey, which holds the presidency and is hosting the conference, while Australia is leading the negotiations. This unusual division of responsibilities could open up new opportunities to bring different interests together.

At the same time, opposition parties, civil society and critical media in Turkey are under immense political pressure. Contradictions in the country's domestic climate and energy policies could further undermine Turkey's credibility. Hosting COP31 in Turkey therefore presents two opportunities: to scrutinise the country's climate and energy ambitions and to demonstrate international solidarity with the Turkish climate movement and critical civil society.

Climate finance continues to be the sticking point at every COP.

Even when developments in partner countries warrant criticism, it remains right to make full use of every opportunity for cooperation. At the same time, there needs to be open dialogue on contentious issues to embed climate and energy policy more firmly in society and enable broad participation. An important measure of the success of Turkey's COP presidency will therefore also be whether Turkish civil society can freely express its positions and participate effectively in the discussions surrounding the conference.

Many are meanwhile looking to Australia's leadership of the negotiations, hoping for progress on phasing out fossil fuels and reducing CO_2 emissions. Moving away from coal, oil and gas is one of the defining tasks of our time. It is not only a climate imperative, but also a matter of economic and geopolitical security. Energy crises have repeatedly demonstrated how vulnerable economies are when they remain dependent on fossil fuel imports.

An international roadmap for phasing out fossil fuels could help deliver tangible progress at COP31. Germany has already sent an important signal with its own roadmap for the phase-out of fossil fuels. The task now is to move forward together with other countries. Where multilateral consensus falls short, coalitions of the willing can demonstrate that the transition is nevertheless moving ahead.

The scale of the challenges is illustrated by the host country itself. Although Turkey is pursuing electrification, more than half of its electricity was still generated from coal and natural gas in 2025. It has yet to present a plan for phasing out fossil fuels. Hosting the COP therefore also gives Ankara an opportunity to translate its own climate ambitions into concrete action.

Climate finance presents another major test. Industrialised countries are calling for greater ambition in reducing emissions. Countries in the Global South, in turn, rightly demand financial support to help them do so. The central conflict in the annual climate negotiations remains unresolved: climate finance continues to be the sticking point at every COP.

At COP29 in Baku, an agreement was reached for industrialised countries to provide at least $300 billion a year in climate finance by 2035. However, the gap between this target and the funding actually being provided remains enormous — and is currently widening.

Demanding more ambitious climate action while failing to honour financial commitments undermines the willingness to cooperate globally. Cuts therefore cannot be the answer. Innovative instruments such as international levies on particularly climate-damaging activities in aviation and shipping, debt relief or an international wealth tax could help mobilise new funds without placing further strain on public budgets. Here, too, alliances of pioneering countries could be established.

Climate action can only succeed in the long term if it is socially just.

Climate action can only succeed in the long term if it is socially just. People need to see that they are not bearing the costs alone, but are also benefiting from new jobs, clean energy, better living conditions and economic opportunities. A ‘just transition’ is therefore a fundamental prerequisite for climate policy to gain public acceptance and deliver lasting results. This applies to industrialised countries just as much as to countries in the Global South, which must reconcile their economic development with the transformation of their energy systems.

At COP30 in Brazil, the decision to develop an international mechanism for a socially just transition to a climate-neutral economy marked an important historic achievement that has received far too little attention. The task now is to turn this into a global instrument for socially just climate action that improves international cooperation, promotes

common standards and brings existing initiatives together.

The example of Turkey shows that the concept of a just transition must not simply be enshrined in law, but must also be shaped with the active involvement of trade unions. Although Turkey's 2025 Climate Law defines just transition as a concept and initial consultation processes involving the social partners are under way, it remains difficult to assess how inclusive these processes actually are and whether they enable the effective participation of trade unions, local authorities and the climate movement.

COP31 does not need groundbreaking new agreements. What matters is that existing promises are finally turned into action. Its success will be measured by whether it advances the implementation of existing commitments, strengthens new alliances and enables concrete steps towards greater climate action. This requires a consistent phase-out of fossil fuels, sustainable international financing and a transformation that puts social justice at its heart.



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