

Workshop on Reimagining Climate Governance: Reforms, Models, and Actions

24 July 2025, 10:30 - 16:00 ET

VENUE (in-person and online)

Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office
866 United Nations Plaza #120, New York, NY 10017

Convened by the **United Nations University Centre for Policy Research (UNU-CPR)**, in collaboration with the Governments of Brazil and Germany, the British Academy and the Bahá'í International Community's United Nations Office.

Summary Note on Discussions

Held under the Chatham House Rule, this workshop brought together experts, diplomats, and practitioners to explore the future of global climate governance. While the multilateral climate regime has delivered vital progress, implementation remains dangerously out of sync with scientific consensus and government commitments. It also falls short of securing a sustainable trajectory for humanity on a livable planet. Despite growing awareness and activism, current patterns of investment, consumption, and political decisionmaking are reinforcing the status quo and widening the gap between climate ambition and action.

The workshop followed a high-level dialogue convened on 1 May 2025 by UNU-CPR, in response to President Lula's G20 call for a UN Climate Change Council and a call for reflection issued by COP30 President Ambassador André Corrêa do Lago. In his letters of 1 March and 8 May 2025, Ambassador do Lago emphasized the need for a global *mutirão*—a Brazilian concept referring to a collective effort or community mobilization to achieve a shared goal. For climate governance, this means a coordinated global push toward more agile and coherent institutional arrangements that promote speed, data sharing, and collaboration, while reinforcing the central role of the UNFCCC.

This follow-up workshop provided an opportunity to explore more deeply governance challenges and opportunities introduced during the May dialogue. Rather than settling on specific institutional designs, participants tested ideas, surfaced cross-cutting themes, and identified points of convergence and tension across proposals. Brazil's framing and the application of complexity science helped shape a vocabulary for evaluating the political and technical feasibility of reforms.

The 24 July discussions were organized around three themes:

- Software: ideas and approaches,
- Hardware: rules and institutions, and
- Politics: trade-offs and coalition-building.

Three synthesis papers will capture insights from written submissions and the workshop dialogue, which will then be shared with the broader community in the lead-up to COP30 and published as part of a special feature in *Global Governance*, the journal of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS).

Upgrading the Software – Applying Complexity Science to Climate Governance

The first session explored the "operating logic" of climate governance: how decisions are made, how knowledge is integrated, and how institutions manage uncertainty. Participants agreed that current governance practices—largely linear, compartmentalized, and slow-moving—are fundamentally misaligned with the complex, fast-evolving nature of climate risk.

A key insight was that climate change is not a single-sector challenge, but a multidimensional phenomenon entangled with global economic, social, ecological, and security systems. This calls for a shift from reductionist models to complexity-informed approaches that recognize interdependence, feedback loops, and self-organization. Participants urged the incorporation of Earth system science, systems thinking, and complexity science into institutional decision-making processes—not as an add-on, but as a foundational shift in mindset.

The 2025 Global Tipping Points conference was cited as a critical step in reframing how institutions approach climate risk. The discussion emphasized the urgency of avoiding negative tipping points while deliberately engineering positive ones that can accelerate transformative change. Participants noted that conventional approaches often focus on linear progress—such as reducing fossil fuel use incrementally—while overlooking the potential for interventions that generate exponential, system-wide shifts. Identifying and acting on such leverage points was seen as essential to reorienting climate governance toward solutions at the necessary speed and scale. This approach also advances Article 2.1(c) of the Paris Agreement by directing financial flows toward activities capable of triggering these transformative, climate-resilient pathways.

Participants also discussed the need to elevate science within high-level political processes. One proposal was to institutionalize regular, science-led briefings at the start of major negotiations, akin to how central banks integrate technical analysis into monetary policy deliberations. Participants also underscored the need to pair scientific expertise with social science insights to address the political and behavioral realities that shape climate action. Others noted that without direct pathways to decision-makers, even the best available science will fail to shape outcomes.

Some speakers emphasized that “software” also includes cultural and epistemic dimensions. Participants argued that the governance system must expand its knowledge base to include ancestral knowledge, Indigenous science, and place-based practices. These often-overlooked sources of insight offer opportunities to build resilience and legitimacy, particularly in frontline communities. Some examples were shared of hybrid governance models that intentionally combine scientific expertise with local knowledge to inform adaptation, conservation, and early warning systems.

Finally, the idea of “governance for emergence” was introduced, describing systems that are responsive rather than reactive, capable of learning and adapting as conditions change. Participants highlighted the importance of institutional reflexivity, scenario planning, and deliberative processes that bring together diverse forms of knowledge and foresight. Crucially, such systems must also be able to monitor and absorb early signals of systemic change—a function identified as a major gap in the current climate regime. Building this capacity was seen as essential to navigating uncertainty and accelerating proactive responses.

Building Adaptive Hardware – Institutions that Evolve with Risk

This session focused on the structural dimensions of governance—how mandates, institutions, and legal norms must evolve to match the scale and volatility of climate risk. While the current architecture emphasizes diplomacy and consensus-building, participants noted that it is increasingly fragmented and slow in implementation. Several emphasized that responding effectively to climate threats will require institutional arrangements that can move beyond consensus-based decision-making, allowing for more flexible and action-oriented approaches.

The discussion highlighted a growing recognition that the global response to climate change is diverse but also diffused. Cities, corporations, civil society organizations, Indigenous communities, and multilateral institutions are taking action, sometimes with and mostly without direction from the UNFCCC. Rather than resisting this polycentric reality, governance reform should formalize and empower it, creating connective tissue among dispersed efforts. A “system of systems” is already emerging, and the challenge is to make it more coherent, accountable, and responsive.

The concept of *mutirão*—a Brazilian term for collective action grounded in mutual obligation—was used to describe this emerging paradigm. It suggests a model of governance where no part of the system can thrive unless all are supported. Participants emphasized that the future of climate governance lies not in a single authority, but in multilevel and multilateral cooperation animated by this principle of interdependence.

Participants addressed the proposal to establish a new high-level climate council or commission designed to complement—not replace—existing institutions such as the UNFCCC. The council would act as a guardian of accountability, an accelerator of implementation, and a coordinator across science, finance, and policy. Its core functions could include emergency response, rapid information sharing, and financial mobilization. Drawing on complexity science, the council would aim to trigger positive tipping points—critical thresholds where targeted actions catalyze large-scale transformations across interconnected systems.

Several questions were raised about the council’s institutional design, such as its relationship to existing bodies like the UNFCCC, its perceived legitimacy, and whether it should be housed within the UN system or operate independently. A central issue was membership: should it remain state-centric or include Indigenous leaders, civil society, cultural and religious representatives, the private sector, and public and private financial institutions? While broader inclusion could enhance the council’s ability to mobilize resources and drive change, it may also introduce challenges around representation, coordination, and decision-making.

There was also discussion on whether the council should possess formal authority or operate as a soft-power convening body focused on agenda-setting, knowledge-sharing, and accountability. One participant suggested the council could eventually broaden its focus to encompass the Sustainable Development Goals, reflecting interlinkages across global challenges. Another questioned whether a new council could generate political will on climate and development issues where formal negotiations have not succeeded and warned against replicating existing shortcomings. Others highlighted the potential for more agile, plurilateral “coalitions of the willing” to complement the council’s role by advancing high-ambition action while the council provides direction. All agreed that institutional design involves trade-offs between inclusivity, legitimacy, and effectiveness, and emphasized the value of identifying institutional models or “prototypes.” In this context, Brazil’s “Circles” approach—such as the Circle of Finance Ministers, bringing together ministers, experts, private sector actors, and civil society to shape the Baku–Belém Roadmap, and the Circle of COP Presidents, which convenes past COP leaders to advise on accelerating Paris Agreement implementation—could be an informative example.

Legal innovations were discussed as emerging tools for climate governance reform. Participants pointed to recent advisory opinions by the International Court of Justice and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as important developments. These opinions reframe climate change from a matter of political discretion to a binding legal obligation, transforming climate commitments—often seen as voluntary—into enforceable duties under international law.

International legal decisions and “hard law” instruments can create new pressures on governments and institutions to comply with climate goals and provide clearer standards for what is expected under international climate agreements. The courts’ involvement signals an evolving normative landscape in which climate action is increasingly grounded in legal rights and obligations rather than only diplomatic negotiation and voluntary pledges.

However, participants also acknowledged the risks and tensions that arise when legal interpretations intersect with the politics of climate governance. If courts interpret nationally determined contributions (NDCs)—essentially political pledges made by countries—as legally binding commitments, states may deliberately lower ambition to avoid legal action.

More broadly, participants recognized that governments around the world are pursuing competing priorities, with many expanding oil and gas production even as they commit to climate targets. Legal pathways can help sharpen accountability, but they operate within a geopolitical context where states are often attempting to pursue energy security, economic growth, and decarbonization simultaneously.

Rather than trying to reconcile this tension—between long-term climate commitments and short-term political and economic pressures—new governance mechanisms must be equipped to navigate it. This means acknowledging trade-offs, anticipating policy reversals, and building resilience into cooperation frameworks so that progress can continue even amid conflicting national strategies.

Political Dynamics – Unlocking Cooperation for Change

The final session shifted from institutional design to political strategy, asking how climate governance innovations can gain traction in a world marked by competing priorities, polarized narratives, and uneven capacities. The central question was how to move from a logic of negotiation to one of implementation.

One participant identified three narrative “baskets” that can help build broader coalitions:

- The **awareness basket**, emphasizing scientific risk and climate urgency
- The **opportunity basket**, focused on development, innovation, and green jobs
- The **justice basket**, grounded in equity, loss and damage, and historical responsibility

These narratives tend to mobilize distinct constituencies—scientific advocates, investors, and justice-oriented movements—and the lack of overlap among them may hinder unified momentum. A key challenge for any new initiative is to develop bridging language that allows translation across these frames and aligns them with people’s lived experiences. Policymakers must show how climate action can protect dignity, improve livelihoods, and respond to deeply held cultural and political values.

Resistance was recognized as a defining feature of any transition. From entrenched fossil fuel interests to bureaucratic inertia, pushback is inevitable. One strategy proposed was to “become a resistance to the resistance”—by designing reforms that preempt opposition and draw new allies into the fold. This includes leveraging sectors already experimenting with change, such as technology, the arts, and local government.

Several speakers noted the importance of positive tipping points, especially for political and coalition dynamics. These can be technological (e.g. EV cost parity), social (e.g. norm shifts), or institutional (e.g. net-zero legislation triggering policy diffusion). Identifying and catalyzing such tipping points was seen as a strategic way to accelerate change and overcome inertia.

Participants also emphasized that large-scale energy transformations—such as those envisioned under Just Energy Transition Partnerships (JETPs)—must be grounded in political and social realities, not just technical design or financial ambition. Transitions that ignore the role of fossil fuel industries in local economies risk failure. One participant pointed to South Africa, where coal mining accounts for just 0.5% of national employment, but jobs are regionally concentrated, unionized, and highly sought after. To succeed, transition packages must direct green investment toward labor-intensive sectors that deliver visible, near-term benefits for workers and communities. Without this, transitions may stall or trigger backlash, undermining both climate goals and political stability.

A parallel conversation focused on how coalitions are built—and why they succeed or fail. Participants reflected on the complexity of aligning positions within groups like the G77, which includes a wide range of countries with diverse interests and capabilities. One former negotiator noted that trust can be more important than alignment. Durable coalitions often depend on informal, low-pressure convenings, outside formal negotiation rooms, where relationships are built and political space created for creative alignment.

Several participants pointed to the role of “coalitions of the willing”—informal, agile groupings of countries, cities, or other actors ready to advance high-ambition ideas. Examples included:

- Mission-oriented clubs around key sectors (e.g. shipping, steel) where early adopters pilot new regulatory and financing models;
- South-South and North-South alliances focused on shared vulnerabilities or opportunities, such as distributed renewables or food systems transformation
- Finance coalitions bringing together MDBs, sovereign donors, and private investors to scale club-based initiatives into real capital flows.
- Coalitions of cities that coordinate on climate action and share best practices, sometimes moving faster than their national governments.

The Climate Club and High Ambition Coalition were cited as instructive—but also limited—prototypes, with some noting the difficulty of maintaining momentum beyond political cycles. City-level alliances such as C40, which has participated in recent climate dialogues alongside heads of state, show how subnational actors can maintain ambition when national governments do not. Participants agreed that future coalitions may work best as “strategic scaffolding”—flexible platforms that coordinate actors around shared goals—rather than as fixed institutions tied to a single organization or formal process.

Ultimately, legitimacy in climate governance will come from results. People must see themselves reflected in the systems meant to serve them. This requires attention not only to carbon and capital, but also to dignity, justice, and lived experience. As one participant put it, the task ahead—at COP30 and beyond—is to connect “radical action to people,” transforming abstract climate targets into collective narratives of possibility and purpose.

Conclusions

The workshop closed with a recognition of the increasing complexity of climate governance alongside an unprecedented political window opened by Brazil's COP30 presidency, which is driving momentum for innovation, inclusion, and ambition. Yet such windows are short-lived and require new ways of thinking—not just new mechanisms—to fully seize the opportunity.

The COP30 presidency framed this moment as a collective responsibility, not only to critique existing agendas but to “step into the cockpit” of climate governance and help steer the course. Brazil's three COP30 objectives—strengthening multilateralism, accelerating implementation, and connecting radical action to people—offer an initial framework.

The COP30 Presidency closed by proposing two “subversive” shifts for COP30.

First, a shift from a logic of consensus to one of action. For over thirty years, climate governance has prioritized achieving consensus before decisive steps are taken. The presidency urged reversing this dynamic: to act proactively, using cooperation as a catalyst to build consensus, rather than waiting for consensus to enable action.

Second, the call for a global *mutirão*. Progress cannot rest on the shoulders of any single actor or institution; instead, it requires aligned, decentralized, and distributed action across a broad network of stakeholders. The Presidency concluded with a powerful call to all participants: “Everyone here—whether online or in the room—shares this vision. We are aligned. Now, to drive real change, we must ask ourselves: What can we do? What can we offer?”