



Season 3. Episode 7: Rebecca Thissen: Putting Climate Justice at the Heart of COP30

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone. Welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. Today we turn our attention to COP30, the Climate Summit, that brought leaders and advocates from around the globe to Brazil. As the stakes rise and the climate emergencies escalate, that gathering became a battle ground for ideas, negotiations, and tough compromises.

Joining me is Rebecca Thissen, Global Advocacy Lead at CAN International from Brussels. With depth of experience in international law and a long track record defending Climate Justice, Rebecca has played a vital role in shaping advocacy around climate finance and strategy. Her insights are helping drive collective action beyond paper agreements.

Rebecca, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

Rebecca Thissen: Thank you, Hisham. Good morning, everyone.

Hisham Allam: Good morning, Rebecca. You were present in Belem, during COP30. How would you summarize the atmosphere, and the key driving forces behind these year's negotiations?

Rebecca Thissen: A very challenging COP. I must say the external context that was happening in the world outside of Belem was very much influencing the atmosphere in the rooms in Brazil. So, we could see a lot of the effect of the geopolitical tensions, the wars, the conflict, the trade wars as well that were influencing country's position. And also, the presidency that took the bet to try to be a bit more creative, innovative, but also very ambitious. But they pushed countries a lot more than any presidency I've been observing in my last years of attending a COP. And that bet was a very risky one because you could see that many countries were then, very tense and not always trusting the way the presidency was proposing as a way forward.

Very challenging, very tense but in the end landed on a kind of a consensual decision, which is already something

Hisham Allam: I think you have read a lot of critics on social media and articles that this summit is more the summit for words, not actions.



DevelopmentAid Dialogues

Episode 7 Season 3



Rebecca Thissen: Yeah, I don't know if I would agree with that. Because of course we are always expecting more of COPs, and I think maybe sometimes we miss a bit, the point of what COP can achieve and what COP can't achieve. So of course it could have, be more ambitious. Some important decisions were missing. But I think, again, in the challenging context, we are in, right?

In a very fragmented multilateralism, a retreat of international cooperation. The fact that countries could come together and send a message to the world that international cooperation is a duckie driver for climate action was really important. So, I think 10 years after the Paris Agreement, of course, it was not as ambitious as we could have hoped, but yet the machine of the climate transition is still working, is still moving forward.

I think we have also to acknowledge that and something I think that came out of this COP. Very strongly and I think that should be one of the headlines and I don't see that appearing on social media is the fact that now countries also acknowledge that social justice and the realities of people, of communities, of workers are part of the climate action discourse.

And I think that's something we really need to elevate more moving forward.

Hisham Allam: Rebecca many told that the summits call for a global shift away from fossil fuels, but the final text stopped short of demanding a full phase out.

Why was the consensus on this issue so elusive. And what were the biggest obstacles?

Rebecca Thissen: Just to resituate where this fossil fuel phase out conversation is coming from. In COP28, in 2023 in Dubai for the first time, parties agreed to transition away from fossil fuels. Which was a of course, a major breakthrough in the COP history.

First time we can have the fossil fuel word mentioned. It was long overdue, but it happened. But the problem with that decision, and I think that's often overlooked in the media, is the fact that COP28 at the time didn't commit to any finance. For that phase out to happen. And as without what we call in the COP context means of implementation, so support, capacity building technology transferred qualitative finance is very hard to imagine that this transition away from fossil fuel will happen, in particular in the global south, obviously, because, the context is obviously not the same as historical emitters in developed countries.

So, I think we have the world phase out. We haven't yet managed to make it concrete and to really think through how this phase would actually materialize in countries where still in dept in countries who face a very high cost of capital was then very hard for them to access green technologies, et cetera, et cetera.

So, I think we should not be obsessed by the fact of repeating the fossil fuel language. We should be much more focused on providing clear avenues for implementing that decision. And I think one way to do that was agreed in Belem this year is through the just transition mechanism that was adopted in the just transition work program.



DevelopmentAid Dialogues

Episode 7 Season 3



I think it's important of course, to flag the fact that the fossil fuel conversation is not addressed enough in COP, and we will need probably a higher political signal, but political signal alone will never suffice to make the transition happen on the ground. If we do not back that up with adequate support technology and finance.

Hisham Allam: Building on that, one of COP thirties landmark outcomes was tripling climate adaptation finance by 2035. Do you see this as a breakthrough and does triple actually mean in real terms of vulnerable countries?

Rebecca Thissen: Thank you for that question. I think it's a very important one.

So maybe also talking you through with the dynamics of the last day of the COP. So what we observed in the room particularly in the second week of the COP is a trading off on one side adaptation finance and on the other side the fossil fuel language. And one of the key player in that dirty game, if I may say it like that, is the European Union.

They said really clearly in some of the room we were in that if developing countries, so of course targeting China, Saudi Arabia, India would not agree on more ambitious fossil fuel language; they would not agree to put more finance for adaptation. So, they were creating that kind of conditionality, like conditioning the adaptation support to more ambition from other countries.

But that's just forgetting that adaptation finance is a legal commitment embedded in the UNFCCC Convention embedded in the Paris Agreement. So, this type of game should not have been happening in the first place. And of course, it created a lot of tension and a race to the bottom for adaptation finance.

So, what we have now in the text was totally diluted from the initial demand from developing countries and particularly the most vulnerable. We have a tripling, yes, we have the word tripling, but if you look at what we are actually tripling from, there is no clarity. We have no baseline. We have no clarity of who would actually pay for it.

And we have no timeline. The timeline is by 2035, which, by within 10 years, so many things can happen. So many climate extreme events will hit the global solve. And so, it's definitely not meeting the expectation and the needs.

Hisham Allam: Yes. It was just a hope, a dream.

Rebecca Thissen: It was not a dream or a hope. It was just an outcry based in science and the reality of the ground from the majority of the global self. But it ended up in buzzwords and yes logos rather than concrete action.



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Episode 7 Season 3



Hisham Allam: Brazil introduced the pillar package, focusing on just transition and social justice. How significant is this shift, and does it meaningfully address the concerns of marginalized communities?

Rebecca Thissen: I think that's probably the major outcome of this COP, and I'm happy you asked a question about it. It hasn't been really addressed by different media.

Specifically in the just transition work program decision, we have the establishment of the Belem action mechanism. Which is a fight that civil society has been pushing for, for many years now, but also the G7, so the vast majority of developing countries calling for this mechanism to be agreed in Belem.

The reason why it is very important and timely is because we hope that this mechanism would help to connect in a much more concrete manner, the reality of the transition on the ground to core decisions. We have all those big objectives like embedded in the Paris Agreement in different decisions.

For example the 1.5 degrees objective, the facing all fossil fuels, et cetera, et cetera. We have a very weak assessment of how to make that happen on the ground. In the way that is fair and just for people. So hopefully this mechanism that is a coordination and support mechanism would help to bring different actors to the table, including marginalized communities, including workers, trade unions, practitioners, to actually nourish much more the conversation in the COP context and make it much more palatable to implement those decisions.

Hisham Allam: Moving on to climate finance, which remains the headline issue with calls for \$1.3 trillion in annual funding by 2035. What is your assessment of the summit's proposals on climate finance, and are they credible and actionable in your view?

Rebecca Thissen: The short answer is no. COP29 last year was the finance COP. And it was one of the worst outcome we could have imagined. So, we paid the price for that very bad decision this year in Belem. So while I was not expecting anything major to happen on finance in Brazil including because the presidency made it very clear that they didn't want to have a finance COP again.

We could say that the climate finance discussions were haunting every other negotiating tracks. But what worried me the most to be honest, is not only that we didn't see any progress, but we actually saw even more backsliding and the attitude of developed countries the European Union, the UK, Canada, doing everything they could in every single room to dilute their responsibilities even more and shifting the burden onto developing countries. Pointing the fingers at China, at India, at Saudi Arabia saying you should pay as well, we don't have the responsibility to pay anymore, is a really worrying trend because their historical responsibilities are the core of multilateralism.

Hisham Allam: COP30 highlighted the role of AI generated content and misinformation in shaping climate narratives. Did this issue receive serious attention during the summit? And what risks does it pose to climate advocacy in public engagement?



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Episode 7 Season 3



Rebecca Thissen: I'm not so sure I've seen that factor a lot during COP negotiation, but it's definitely a very worrying trend.

We've been observing all over any kind of peaks this year with the Trump administration and similar government who are just actively undermining climate science by dismantling climate science institution firing, robust administrative agencies, et cetera, et cetera.

And that's contributing of course, or very heavy climate denialism discourses across the board. And adding that with the, of course, social media algorithm and the fact that many people are now yeah, unable to dissociate between what's actually science-based information and just scam. It is a very worrying trend, I must say. And it's obstructing a lot of efforts we and our allies are trying to do moving forward. So that's definitely something we need to watch and encounter in the coming months and years.

Hisham Allam: Rebecca, from your work with CAN International, what do grassroots organizations and civil society groups really need from these summits to be able to drive a change on the ground?

Rebecca Thissen: Few things. They need a seat at the table. Because, no matter what the presidency said about this people's COP and indigenous COP it was really far from being the reality. We are outside of the rooms. We are not able to participate. We're not able to just hear what's happening. And that's the first basic we have.

Participation is embedded in the Paris Agreement as one of its pillar, then you need to make sure civil society is in the room and has the right to speak and to interact, which was not the case in Belem specifically during the second week. But then you also have to support specifically grassroots organization, do not have the same capacity and resources to meaningfully participate to the COP, but also to all the events that are organized throughout the years.

So, you need to be intentional about how inclusive you want to be and you can't just be, I don't know if that's a word, but like participation washing in some of the high level event organized, and suddenly you have, a few community leaders being there, giving two minute speeches, but that's not what meaningful participation mean.

Meaningful participation is planned, predictable, structured, and funded. That's what we need to make sure those voices are heard and anchored in the COP decisions moving forward.

Hisham Allam: So, building on this, how did geopolitical tensions, from your opinion, whether between oil producing countries or the global north and south shape the outcomes of COP30? Did they hinder progress or perhaps highlight new alliances and approaches?



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Rebecca Thissen: Yeah, I think it's very clear that COP can't be treated in silos from external realities. I think more and more in this very fragmented context we can't ignore that we are in a very difficult geopolitical situation.

And it had definitely an influence on the topic that were rising during the discussion. The tension between country blocks and of course the weakening of the ambition in the end. So, I think it's important to remind ourselves what COP can actually do and what they should be focusing on, but also how do we connect to climate discussion with other spaces and other initiatives, right?

So, I think we are gonna see much more regional and south south initiatives coming up in the coming years. And I think those should also be influencing and be reflected in the COP decision. For example, you have, the initiative led by Colombia and now the Netherlands about Fossil Fuel Phase-Out, inviting many countries to Colombia in April, 2026.

So that could be something that maybe is gonna drive more ambition and then could be brought into the COP context. But also, for example, you have a group of developing countries who are willing to set up a debtors club. In depth countries who want to speak among themselves and find a way to challenge the current debt architecture.

And that's actually something that could also be very impactful for the finance discussion in COP, right? Because climate finance without debt justice is actually meaningless. So, all those kind of boiling initiatives and forums I think are very interesting to watch and then to be connected to the international climate diplomacy regime.

Hisham Allam: That sounds great. Reflecting on the summit's final outcome, what would you consider the missing pieces? What is not being addressed and what urgent priorities should be carried over to COP31?

Rebecca Thissen: I think bottom line Belem was more a COP where we planted seeds for potential success moving forward. But definitely we missed the opportunity to have strong decisions. What's missing?

Hisham Allam: Every summit you plant seeds.

Rebecca Thissen: Yeah, so some summits we have decisions, but here we definitely didn't have any besides the just transition one I was commenting about earlier. But I think something that's really missing, and it's nothing new nor groundbreaking, but is the need to consider finance as a critical enabler for climate action.

I feel that as long as developed countries are refusing to come with a more constructive mind to those talks, understanding that without support, technology, transfer and finance, nothing is going to move. We are



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Episode 7 Season 3



gonna get stuck, right? And think there are concrete ways forward. We've been pushing for this for many years and this year as well.

And I could see some opening from some now that the US are out and they realize, for example, the European Union realize that they have to build new type of partnerships, right? They can't just be hiding behind the US because they're now away from the picture. But I think if the finance conversation and more generally like the international cooperation conversation.

Because it's also including trade, tax, debts beyond the specific finance discussion. If that is not embedded in a much more clear way moving forward, I think we better stay home in the coming years. So hopefully that's gonna change moving forward.

Hisham Allam: Last but not least, given where things stand after COP30, are you hopeful about the possibility of limiting global warming and delivering genuine climate justice? Or do you think the world risks falling short?

Rebecca Thissen: I don't think I have the luxury to not being optimistic, honestly. We know that every tiny degrees saved is already impacting billions of life. We don't have the time to wait or to be defeatist. We just have to continue.

But definitely the second part of your question, whether or not climate justice would be at the core is what we are fighting for, because climate action, without centering people, communities, and without making it just. It's just not working. I think we have to also to acknowledge that 10 years after the Paris Agreement, one reason why progress is being so slow is because climate action is seen as heavily unfair and elitists and only speaking to certain part of the populations, to certain countries, to certain economies, and leaving the majority of the world behind. So maybe we can do now a bet for the next decade of the Paris Agreement implementation that climate justice become central and core and not just, preamble or footnote. And in that sense, I may be hopeful that it would work and that we will have a meaningful progress moving forward.

Hisham Allam: Rebecca, thank you for sharing your perspective from inside COP30 and helping us untangle the real impact of the summit's decisions. Your experiences remind us that change is built in every honest discussion and every step taken, whether in negotiating rooms or on the ground. For our listeners, I appreciate you joining us to explore these urgent issues.

Follow us on DevelopmentAid Dialogues on your favorite podcast platforms to catch future episodes. I'm Hisham Allam, signing off. See you next time. Goodbye.