

A highway to hypocrisy

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Opinion

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COP30

Media reporting around preparations of COP30 climate summit is worrying. COP30 is the 30th UN-led Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is slated to take place in Belém, Brazil in November this year. Preparations are currently on for this global summit which will bring thousands of people to the port city of Belém. According to a recent BBC news report, a four-lane highway “is being built for the COP30 climate summit.”

This new highway, aimed to ease traffic, will cut through “tens of thousands of acres of protected Amazon rainforest.” The deforestation of the Amazon rainforest has drawn criticism from conservationists and locals, who argue that it directly contradicts the summit’s environmental goals. The UNFCCC was adopted in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Its primary aim is to discuss steps toward international climate action for which it organises the annual COP summit.

The COP provides a platform for strengthening carbon emission reduction targets and promoting climate change adaptation strategies. Constructing a new highway through the Amazon rainforest, a well-known carbon sink, is bound to raise eyebrows. It has also put the intent of the COP30 summit under scrutiny. The four-lane Avenida Liberdade highway is presently under construction in Belém and is expected to improve traffic flow after it is completed. On their part, the COP30 Secretariat in Brazil has put out a clarification that the construction of this new highway is not one of the “33 infrastructure projects planned for COP30”.

The highway is designed to connect various parts of the city which may include the central venue of the COP30 summit. The project will improve accessibility for COP attendees; however, its construction contradicts the very environmental principles the conference is meant to uphold. The highway cuts through protected Amazon rainforest areas and sets a dangerous precedent for the region and for future COP events. The first COP of the UNFCCC took place in Berlin, Germany in 1995. Since then, COP has been held every year with few exceptions and has become an annual gathering of individuals interested in combating climate change.

The summit brings together world leaders, government officials from UNFCCC member states along with NGOs, inter-governmental organisations, and private sector stakeholders. However, the summit is not without inherent contradictions highlighted further by the Avenida Liberdade construction project. While COP attendees travel half-way across the world contributing significantly to carbon emissions, the COP sets ambitious carbon reduction targets that are often unmet. The targets remain unattainable even though they are achievable either because of lack of genuine commitment or the required follow-through.

While the UN-led COP undeniably serves as a global platform for climate policy and action, its current operational structure raises valid questions about its sustainability. Is it truly driving change, or has it become just another exercise in greenwashing for some nations? The focus of COP30 on infrastructure development to accommodate more than 50,000 expected participants is equally concerning. Should COP30 really be organised as a global sporting-like gala event for increasing tourism and expanding urban infrastructure? And if that is indeed a focus, the opportunity should be used to promote ecotourism, reforestation, and sustainable travel.

The UN indeed has a carbon offset platform where individuals and organisations can compensate for their emissions by paying money. However, COPs held earlier have not been able to make carbon offsetting universally accepted by all UNFCCC member

nations. In the absence of its unanimous implementation, critics argue that it favours big polluters and does not make any real reduction in global carbon emissions. The aim behind organising COP30 and other climate conferences is to push for sustainable solutions. Rethinking how global conferences are held and how they can be made sustainable is crucial. Climate conferences can significantly reduce their environmental impacts by transitioning to virtual format or choosing eco-friendly venues. This will drastically cut emissions, lower costs and enhance participation in these summits.

Scientists and policy makers from less developed countries, small NGOs and indigenous groups will be able to take part in this manner thereby enhancing inclusivity. Advanced virtual reality spaces should be used which can mimic real conference interactions. A similar approach should be followed by the pre-COP regional summits to ensure grassroots concerns are heard and addressed. A one-size-fitsall approach at COP summits will remain ineffective without understanding localized needs and vulnerabilities to climate change. The planned Avenida Liberdade highway through the Amazon rainforest will pave the way for further deforestation and ecosystem disturbance, contradicting COP's commitments and exposing the gap between promises and actions. COP30 must help resolve the long-standing tensions over Amazon conservation and development, but certainly not in a way that it becomes the beginning of the end for Amazon rainforest.

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