



## The River and the Wall: How Belém's "People's Summit" Redefined Climate Justice

By Chen Jie, for ROOTS.

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For two weeks in November 2025, the heavy humidity of the Amazon clung to every suit and tie that arrived in Belém do Pará. This was the “COP of Truth.” For the first time in thirty years, climate negotiations were held in the biological heart of the planet.

President Lula’s administration worked hard to frame the event as a “Global Mutirão”. This Tupi-Guarani word refers to a collective mobilization where a community comes together to work towards a common goal or purpose. It was a call for a global group effort to finally bridge the gap between the promises made in Paris and the reality of the rainforest.



## The “Mutirão” Meets the Market

Inside the official “Blue Zone” (the area set by the UN for official and diplomatic negotiations), the host nation achieved some pragmatic victories. Facing a deadlock where oil-producing nations blocked strong rules on ending fossil fuels, Brazil and its allies launched a “voluntary roadmap” to keep the transition alive. The meeting also launched the Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF), a bold attempt to create permanent funding for standing forests. Among other major outcomes, COP30 approved the Just Transition Work Programme, which engages employment, industry upgrading and social stability into the climate governance agenda, seeking to guarantee the rights of all people amidst attempts to mitigate climate change.



The Closing Plenary. Source: UN Climate Change/Kiara Worth

But outside, in the sweltering heat of the streets, the definition of success was very different. While experts inside celebrated keeping the diplomatic process alive, civil society argued that “voluntary” measures are too weak for a forest at its tipping point.

The layout of the summit itself highlighted this divide. Inside, an “Agrizone” sponsored by corporate agribusiness giants occupied prime real estate, signaling that the very industries driving deforestation were being welcomed as partners [1]. Meanwhile, over 3,000 Indigenous delegates traveled days by boat to reach the city, only to find that just



14% of them were allowed into the decision-making halls. For them, this was “performative inclusion”—they were invited into the lobby, but the future of their land was being traded in the boardroom [2].

### **The Alternative: Inside the People’s Summit (*Cúpula dos Povos*)**

While the official Blue Zone was defined by security checkpoints and hushed deals, the *Cúpula dos Povos* (People’s Summit) was defined by the rhythm of drums. Anchored at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) but spilling into the streets and waterways from November 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, this parallel summit was a village of resistance convened by a coalition of over 1,100 organizations—ranging from the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) to La Via Campesina—who created an autonomous territory for the “excluded” voices of the negotiations. Their slogan was simple: “*Nós somos a resposta*” (We are the response) [3].



March in Belém with banners saying “We are the response”. Source: APIB.

If the official summit focused on “mitigation” (reducing damage), the People’s Summit focused on “Socio-bioeconomy”. This concept, championed by Indigenous organizations and agrarian movements like the MST, is a direct challenge to the corporate version of the bioeconomy. For activists, a bioeconomy isn’t about pharmaceutical patents or mass-producing açaí for export. Instead, it is about *Bem Viver* (Good Living)—an economic model based on ancestral knowledge and local management of the land.



The core argument here is that a true bioeconomy requires the “demarcation of bodies and territories”. This means legally recognizing that the land belongs to the communities who live there, protecting them from interference by mining companies or carbon brokers.

The movements anchored this vision in the “Belém Declaration of the Peoples”, a document forged through days of intense assemblies at UFPA, which was submitted to André Corrêa do Lago, president of COP 30 at the end of the Summit. It explicitly rejects “green capitalism” and the financialization of nature, arguing that market mechanisms like carbon credits are false solutions that displace communities. Instead, it calls for Popular Agrarian Reform as a central climate technology, asserting that redistributing land to small-scale farmers is the most effective method to cool the planet [4].



The People's Summit. Source: MST/Larissa Lopes

Crucially, the summit bridged local Amazonian struggles with global geopolitics. The Declaration frames the climate crisis as a symptom of the same imperialist system driving conflicts elsewhere, explicitly linking the fight for the Amazon to solidarity with Palestine and the resource wars in the Congo. As one leader from the *Cúpula* stated, capturing the spirit of the convergence: “We have only changed address, but we are in the same village... the answer lies within us.” [5]



## The Financialization Trap: When Nature Became an Asset Class

If the People's Summit was grounded in the soil, the negotiations in the Blue Zone were fixated on the spreadsheet. The centerpiece of the Brazilian Presidency's agenda was the Tropical Forests Forever Facility (TFFF). Billed as a revolutionary tool, this fund proposed raising \$25 billion to pay tropical nations for keeping their forests standing. The idea is to pay a “dividend” on the environmental services the Amazon provides. To the diplomats, this was a pragmatic way to secure conservation cash that foreign governments have failed to provide.

However, for the movements gathered outside, this mechanism represented the ultimate “**financialization of nature**”—the process of turning ecosystems into financial products that can be traded like stocks. A coalition of over 200 organizations, led by the **Global Forest Coalition**, launched a counter-campaign labeling it the “Fake Forest Fund” [6]. Their critique was simple: by tying forest protection to the global stock market, the TFFF gambles the health of the rainforest on the volatility of Wall Street. If the market crashes, the payments dry up, potentially triggering deforestation exactly when money is tightest.

Chief Jonas Mura of the Gavião Real Village articulated this disconnect best. In a statement that became a rallying cry, he declared: “The government talks about saving the forests, but what they're doing... is putting a price on our lives. The forest is not a commodity” [6].

The Loophole Skepticism deepened with the final rules for Article 6 (Carbon Markets), which allow countries to trade pollution permits. Civil society groups like Carbon Market Watch denounced the outcome as a “festival of false solutions”. Their outrage focused on two specific mechanisms that explain the charge of “Green Colonialism”:

First, the “**Zombie Credits**”: The new rules allow countries to use old credits from the defunct Kyoto Protocol era to meet their current targets. These credits are often “hot air”, savings from dubious projects decades ago that have no environmental value today. It is like trying to pay off a current debt with an expired coupon; it allows polluters to claim they are cutting emissions on paper while continuing to burn fossil fuels in reality.

Second, the threats to sovereignty. Environmental organizations argue that carbon markets incentivize a new form of land grabbing. To sell “offsets,” a territory must guarantee the carbon stays stored there for decades. This often leads to contracts that strip local communities of their rights, handing control over to foreign brokers or NGOs who police the land to protect their “asset”, turning Indigenous territories into mere waste dumps for Northern pollution.

## The Fossil Fuel Dilemma: The Trap of Debt and Development



The most glaring contradiction of COP 30 was the status of fossil fuels. Despite being hosted in the Amazon, the summit was paralyzed by a refusal to commit to a binding phase-out of oil, gas, and coal.

However, blaming this solely on “petro-states” misses the deeper economic trap. For countries like Brazil and Bolivia, fossil fuels are an economic lifeline. Rich nations in the Global North are expanding their own oil production while demanding the South leave theirs in the ground. A report from Oil Change International, circulated at the People’s Summit, highlighted that the United States, Norway, and the UK are responsible for the majority of planned oil and gas expansion through 2050 [7].

This double standard fuels Brazil’s argument for the “Right to Development”, who frames oil revenues as necessary capital to fund the green transition—a paradoxical strategy of “drilling for decarbonization”. But this choice is not made in a vacuum. High debt burdens force countries to boost exports of raw materials (like oil and gas). Developing nations are compelled to extract oil not because they want to, but to generate the foreign currency needed to pay back crippling debts to institutions like the IMF and World Bank. As Debt Justice states in its report, you cannot phase out fossil fuels when your economy is held hostage by creditors [8].

The Belém Declaration points out that, instead of the Global South, it’s the Global North that should pay its “ecological debt,” providing the financial freedom for countries to transition without deepening poverty [4]. As the slogan of the summit put it: “We want a transition, but not on our backs”.

### **Conclusion: The Two Mutirões of Belém**

As the humidity lifted, the official negotiations ended not with a breakthrough, but with a sigh of relief that the Paris Agreement hadn’t collapsed.



The People's Summit won the Zero Waste Award by managing 10 tons of waste during the event, a campaign led by MST and other popular organizations. Source: Breno Thomé Ortega

Yet, the enduring legacy of the summit lies in how the concept of *Mutirão* (collective effort) was interpreted. For the state, *Mutirão* meant leveraging private finance to plug gaps in the budget. But for the 70,000 people at the People's Summit, *Mutirão* was reclaimed as a tool for the grassroots. It represented the weaving together of Amazonian Indigenous resistance with Pan-African solidarity and peasant farming. The tents have been packed away, but this *Mutirão* of the people continues—returning to the territories to implement the justice that the text could not.

## References

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