

Defending ambition in Belém: a Fijian negotiator's reflection on COP30



Fiji's Chief Negotiator Sivendra Michael taking part in the Mutirão process during COP30 in Belém, Brazil, November 2025

Photo Credit: UNFCCC/Kiara Worths

by Sivendra Michael

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For Small Island Developing States (SIDS), climate change is not a distant or theoretical concern. It is already reshaping coastlines, undermining food security, and forcing communities to confront displacement. Fiji arrived in Belém for COP30 with a clear purpose: to defend ambition and protect the integrity of the 1.5°C goal. But for vulnerable countries, ambition is inseparable from delivery. Calls to accelerate mitigation or phase out fossil fuels have little meaning without predictable finance, accessible technology, and credible political commitment from those with the greatest responsibility and capacity to act.

COP30 exposed a familiar and deeply troubling reality. Negotiations remained constrained by an entrenched divide between developed countries reluctant to honour long-standing finance commitments and major emerging economies unwilling to strengthen mitigation efforts. This framing, where mitigation is treated as a concession by the North and finance as a concession by the South, has become a convenient fiction. It allows both sides to claim grievance while the window for meaningful action continues to narrow.

This dichotomy is fundamentally flawed. Finance is not separate from mitigation; it enables it. Developing countries cannot deliver ambitious emissions reductions without the means to do so. Treating these as competing priorities rather than interdependent imperatives undermines both climate outcomes and equity.

SIDS refuse to be trapped by this impasse. We emit negligibly, yet consistently advocate for ambitious mitigation. We have contributed least to this crisis, yet understand that adaptation finance alone cannot protect us from a 2°C world. Our advocacy is not for one side of a false binary, but for an integrated response that aligns responsibility, ambition and delivery.

Throughout the negotiations, we repeatedly grounded discussions in lived realities often absent from negotiating texts. Villages are relocating away from eroding shorelines. Saltwater intrusion is degrading agricultural land. Families are rebuilding after increasingly intense cyclones. These experiences sharpen our negotiating clarity. For SIDS, climate ambition is not discretionary. Delay has consequences that are already being borne.

The final hours of COP30 illustrated both the promise and the limits of multilateral climate diplomacy. In the closing phase, fewer than fifty negotiators across all blocs were convened by the presidency to resolve outstanding issues under what became known as [the Mutirão package](#). For more than 27 hours, we moved between consultations, negotiating language line by line in an effort to preserve core principles while keeping the overall outcome intact.

The central point of contention concerned mitigation and unilateral trade measures, particularly whether the outcome would explicitly reference the phase out of fossil fuels or clearly anchor commitments to the 1.5°C temperature goal. SIDS, including Fiji, argued firmly for that linkage. This position was not novel. It reflected commitments already agreed by the same parties at COP28 in Dubai. Yet resistance remained entrenched.

As negotiations entered their final moments, it became clear that insisting on explicit fossil fuel phase out language risked collapsing the entire outcome. Some parties were prepared to walk away. In the end, the language was removed, with assurances from the Brazilian presidency that work on fossil fuels and deforestation roadmaps would continue outside the formal negotiation process.

For Fiji and other SIDS, this was a deeply disappointing outcome. We had worked alongside more than 80 countries to retain language grounded in science and prior decisions. Our decision to yield was not an endorsement of the final text. It was a calculated choice to preserve the multilateral process itself, which, despite its shortcomings, remains the only forum where the voices of vulnerable countries carry legal weight.

This choice was made with clear eyes. The collapse of the UNFCCC framework would not be neutral. It would advantage those already signalling their intent to retreat from multilateral climate commitments. SIDS do not defend this system out of naïveté. We do so because its erosion would further weaken accountability and narrow the already limited avenues available to constrain power.

There were, nonetheless, modest areas of progress. Developed countries agreed, at least on paper, to triple adaptation finance, and [the Belém Action Mechanism](#) was

established to support a just transition. These outcomes matter, even if they fall short of what science and equity require.

In the aftermath of COP30, some commentary suggested that SIDS share responsibility for the summit's shortcomings, or that our demands for ambition were unrealistic. This narrative is inaccurate. I was in those rooms. I know what we pushed for, what we conceded and why.

SIDS consistently contribute beyond their size. We bring practical proposals, broker compromise and work to maintain coherence between ambition, finance and implementation. At COP30, SIDS were among the strongest advocates for a fossil fuel phase-out, for strengthening [the Global Goal on Adaptation](#), and for finance that matches rhetoric. Where ambition ultimately fell short, it was not due to a lack of will from vulnerable countries, but because consensus rules allowed a small number of parties to delay or dilute progress.

Expecting communities already facing displacement to compromise further is what is truly unreasonable. Yet SIDS are repeatedly urged to be patient and satisfied with incremental progress. We engage in good faith because multilateralism still matters, not because we are complacent. Our restraint in public criticism should not be mistaken for acceptance.

Blaming vulnerable countries for outcomes they fought to strengthen distracts from the underlying issue: the persistent lack of political courage and solidarity from those best positioned to lead. SIDS continue to play a stabilising role in the climate negotiations by insisting on alignment between science, equity and action.

Looking ahead, there are reasons for cautious optimism. A coalition of willing countries is advancing work on fossil fuel phase out outside the formal UN process. History suggests this approach can succeed. The global ban on landmines emerged not from paralysed multilateral forums, but from determined coalitions that refused to wait for universal consensus.

Australia's forthcoming role as president of COP31 negotiations presents a significant opportunity to reset the trajectory of the process. As president, Australia will shape agendas, broker compromise and determine whether difficult but necessary issues are brought into the negotiating space rather than deferred. With preparatory negotiations to be held in the Pacific, there is a genuine opportunity to centre the realities of vulnerable countries and rebuild confidence that the UNFCCC can still deliver outcomes aligned with science and equity.

This moment should be used to forge a renewed coalition within the negotiations, committed to ensuring that mitigation language reflects the 1.5°C limit and includes

an explicit commitment to phasing out fossil fuels, consistent with existing decisions. In parallel, action by willing countries outside the UNFCCC must focus on translating political intent into concrete measures, including coordinated phase-out pathways and the redirection of finance away from high-carbon investments towards just transition and adaptation.

These efforts are not a substitute for multilateral outcomes, but a necessary complement to them. Together, leadership within the COP31 negotiations and decisive action beyond them can help rebuild momentum and narrow the ambition gap.

While COP30 did not deliver everything we fought for, this disappointment should not be confused with defeat. Multilateralism remains slow and often frustrating, but it is still indispensable. The United Nations is the only forum where every country, regardless of size, has a seat at the table. Fiji, alongside other Pacific SIDS, will continue to defend ambition, press for accountability and demand delivery. We return to the negotiations not out of habit, but because this remains the space where responsibility is tested and where the line must still be held.

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