

Two worlds, one test: Climate leadership after Belém

 openaccessgovernment.org/article/two-worlds-one-test-climate-leadership-after-belem/203462

Professor Richard Beardsworth analyses climate leadership after Belém, focusing on managing the fossil fuel transition beyond COP30

In an [earlier reflection](#) ahead of COP30, I argued that Belém would test which of two co-existing political logics was gaining ground: a multilateral, rules- based world seeking cooperative leadership around shared planetary risks, and a centrifugal, sovereignty- protective world treating climate obligations as intrusive or optional. Belém delivered that test, but not in the way [headlines suggested](#).

Its significance lay less in the failure to agree on a fossil-fuel phase-out roadmap than in what the negotiations made unmistakable: a structural tension between these two worlds, *crystallised in the politics of transition*. What emerged was a clear alignment of leadership into [two blocs](#): roughly eighty countries demanding a scheduled, equitable exit from fossil fuels and a comparable bloc resisting any such reference. In this sense, Belém was less a multilateral disappointment than a moment of political clarity.

The absence of the United States (U.S.) under a climate-denying administration reinforced this dynamic without creating it. The centrifugal bloc already existed. U.S. non-engagement weakened, however, the normative and coordinating centre of gravity behind a phase-out pathway. The clarity of the impasse opened, nevertheless, political space for leadership outside the COP process, where states can work through this structural tension rather than rely on consensus procedures that cannot resolve it.

Two blocs, two logics of Leadership

The bloc pressing for phase-out – [led by Brazil](#), facilitated by the [Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance](#), [including the Alliance of Small Island States \(AOSIS\)](#), many in the Independent Association of Latin America and the Caribbean (AILAC), the European Union (EU), several African states and multiple climate-vulnerable countries – framed its position around [three reinforcing claims](#): that science demands a rapid decline in fossil-fuel use to keep 1.5°C credible; that equity requires leadership from those with historical responsibility and capacity; and that the Paris process cannot remain coherent without confronting fossil-energy systems directly.

The opposing bloc – comprised of major producers such as the Gulf states and Russia, industrialising economies like India and Indonesia, and several lower-income countries anticipating fossil revenues – advanced [a different but coherent set of logics](#): sovereignty over development pathways, the injustices of uneven transitions, the need for reliable and affordable energy, and deep distrust in the delivery of promised finance. While the full composition of this bloc was never formally declared, its contours were evident from [public interventions and the diplomatic signals](#) that shaped the negotiations.

From principle to feasibility

Yet the structural tension revealed at Belém is less about principle than about feasibility. For many countries whose energy systems, foreign-exchange earnings or industrial strategies remain tied to fossil fuels, [substantial finance is the essential enabling condition](#): without it, the costs of capital, diversification and social transition are prohibitive. But the positions adopted at Belém also made clear that finance alone cannot unlock movement. Countries require credible industrial futures, security assurances and just transition pathways if they are to contemplate a fossil-fuel decline. Effective leadership lies in composing these elements – integrating finance, development strategy, security stabilisation and domestic legitimacy.

Santa Marta as the next stage of leadership

It is in this context that [the forthcoming Santa Marta conference, launched at COP30](#) and co-led by Colombia and the Netherlands, takes on real significance. Rather than waiting for consensus within the COP, Santa Marta offers a venue where coalition-based leadership can address the feasibility constraints that Belém exposed.

Conceived not as a negotiation but as a design exercise, it aims to generate the “[legal, economic and social pathways](#)” through which fossil-fuel exit becomes politically possible for diverse countries. By positioning leadership partly outside the UNFCCC’s consensus machinery, it opens space for progress that multilateral procedures alone cannot deliver.

Santa Marta will matter, however, only if it is set up with clarity of purpose. A forum that focuses on ‘high-level affirmation’ will not alter the bloc dynamics revealed at Belém; only a process that develops the technical, economic and legal frameworks for transition can do so, by providing countries with viable pathways and incentives that do not yet exist within the COP process.

Colombia’s framing and why it must broaden

Colombia’s framing matters for this reason. By presenting Santa Marta as a process for defining and sequencing the legal, economic and social pathways for transition, it shifts the debate from whether to phase out fossil fuels, to the question of how states can do so. Crucially, [this approach](#) recognises that pathways and schedules cannot be uniform. They must reflect the different economic structures, welfare capacities and degrees of fossil dependence that shape transition risks.

But this framing must be broadened. Pathways will only be credible if they integrate predictable finance, industrial repositioning, security stabilisation and just transition measures. Santa Marta, therefore, requires a *multidimensional* leadership strategy: not only the design of *differentiated national pathways* and timetables, but the *international conditions* that make those pathways politically and economically viable.

Conclusion: Belém as a launchpad for implementation

Belém did not deliver a fossil-fuel roadmap, but it offered something more politically foundational: a clear view of the structural landscape within which the transition must now be governed. In this sense, even if Belém did not become the “[COP of implementation](#)” in the narrow sense intended by the Brazilian presidency, it nonetheless exposed something crucial for the future: a mapping of the political, economic and developmental conditions that structure the feasibility of fossil-fuel exit.

The emergence of two blocs, the movement within them and the conditions under which positions might shift, point to a new phase of climate leadership – one that is plural, layered and increasingly enacted alongside, rather than solely within, the COP process. Santa Marta presents the first major test of this shift. If designed with precision and purpose, it can turn the structural tension revealed at Belém into a generative force, creating pathways where COP30 exposed constraints and enabling forms of leadership that the UNFCCC’s consensus machinery cannot.

Far from closing possibilities, Belém may thus have inaugurated a new phase of climate leadership: one centred not on declaratory ambition or example but on constructing the legal, financial, economic and social architectures that make an equitable fossil-fuel exit feasible.