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An indication of opacity: What happened to the climate adaptation indicators at COP30?

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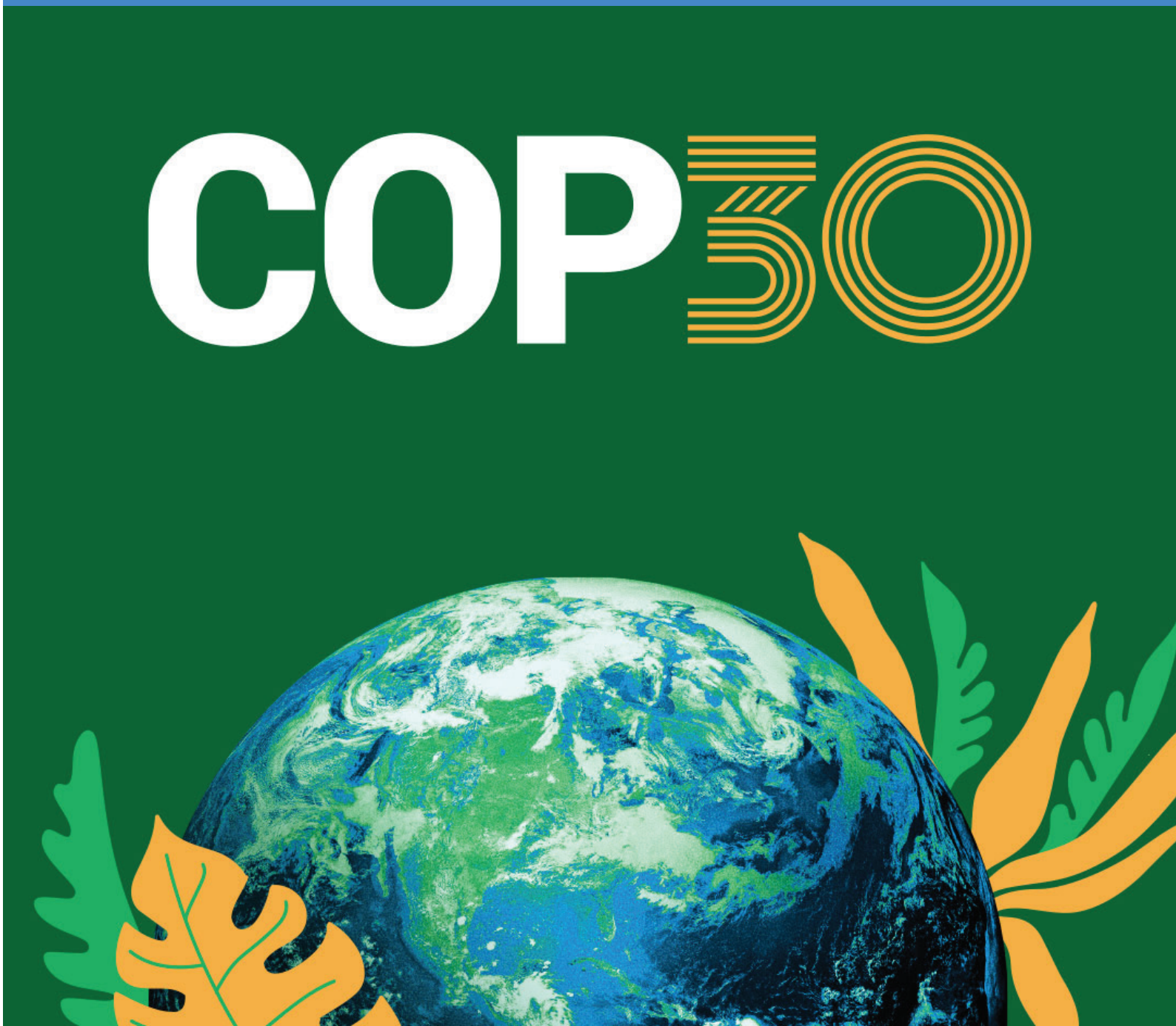

The 2015 Paris Agreement under the UN's climate change convention committed parties to a vague "global adaptation goal," but left it to future convenings to work out the details. At COP30 in Brazil, negotiators adopted a reduced set of indicators to measure progress toward this goal, but jettisoned 40 percent of those submitted. A non-trivial share of those rejected would have measured national budget commitments to climate adaptation. While this result may have been a predictable result of the challenging global politics of climate finance, it is clearly a missed opportunity for people who depend on their governments to ramp up finance for climate adaptation. These indicators may require further work to ensure they are fair and measurable, but domestic public finance metrics cannot ultimately be ignored by world leaders.

Article 7 of the Paris Agreement was an important milestone in the climate negotiations, which had typically been focused on climate mitigation. While mitigation remained central, climate realism demanded that the world invest in adaptation, too, as countries had repeatedly failed to bend the curve on greenhouse gas emissions. The 2015 agreement tried to square this circle: keeping a focus on mitigation goals that were starting to slip out of reach (codified in the two-degree limit, and "pursuing efforts" to limit temperature increases to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels), while also acknowledging the need for adaptation targets in the ever likelier event of busting these temperature targets.

In 2021, the Glasgow-Sharm el-Sheikh work program was launched, which enlisted a technical body to define the global adaptation goal and, among other things, develop a set of indicators to measure progress on climate adaptation.

Why is this needed? The problem with climate adaptation, compared to climate mitigation, is that it is not reducible to one set of actions. Mitigation is essentially about reducing harmful emissions. Yes, there are multiple types of greenhouse gas emission with different timeframes of impact, and so on. But the basic sources of emissions are well understood, as are the basics of reducing them.

Not so for adaptation. Climate adaptation encompasses a very wide range of possible activities, and potential outcomes. It ranges across many sectors, from health to infrastructure, to education, to commerce. There is no natural limit to adaptation, because the heat on a hot planet is going to affect every corner of our lives: not only due to the direct impact of the heat itself, but also its impact on water, wind, fire and so on.

Adaptation is also complex to classify and measure because it requires difficult judgements about the climate impacts to which we are adapting. For example, building infrastructure which is more flood resistant is a form of climate adaptation, but floods are not purely an artifact of climate change: they are, like hurricanes or drought, a naturally occurring event that may be intensified by climate change. Even were there no climate change, governments should be thinking about how to protect citizens from these natural calamities.

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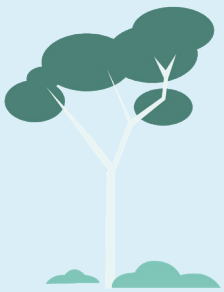
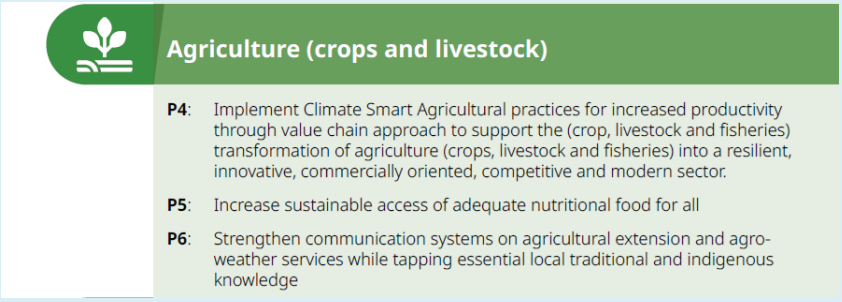


In principle, therefore, we would want to consider climate adaptation to be only the actions taken at the margin to address the intensification of these underlying risks. It should be obvious that measuring the marginal interventions that are "climate adaptation" is not straightforward.

Taken together, these attributes of climate adaptation make it challenging for governments to account for adaptation actions and costs, and for citizens to hold their governments to account for them. What counts as adaptation? What elements are most important? How do we separate ordinary actions to, say, control malaria, from actions to control the increase in malaria (if any) associated with climate change?

The kinds of actions that governments classify as "adaptation" may also be extremely vague, raising doubts about whether they actually contribute to resilience at all. Consider the intended agriculture-related adaptation actions in the most recent Nationally Determined Contribution (all countries produce such documents under the Paris Agreement every five years) from Kenya:



These actions sound like they could be adaptation-related, but what they entail and how to measure them is not obvious. Any reader of this document would immediately ask:

- Which practices are climate smart?
- How will sustainable access to food be achieved? (this is an outcome, rather than an intervention)
- What does it mean to "strengthen communication systems"?

Not surprisingly, then, when we look for adaptation actions in government budgets, they are challenging to identify. This reflects a lack of clear tagging, but also a lack of clarity about what counts as climate adaptation. Again, one cannot say that because climate change might increase malaria prevalence that the entire budget for malaria is "climate adaptation." Nor is access to nutritional food obviously a climate adaptation goal.

Which brings us back to Brazil: according to various sources, the expert group created in 2021 narrowed an original set of thousands of indicators down to a more modest list of 100 for consideration at COP 30, of which 59 were finally approved. It appears that some of the final indicators were altered significantly from the original list, so there was more than just a winnowing. And this is apparently a preliminary set of indicators, with more on the way.

The discussion about these indicators in Brazil was fractious, with Latin American countries wanting to see them adopted now, while African countries pushed to delay them. News reports do not fully explore these divisions, but they seem to stem in part from a fear on the part of African and other lower-income countries that they might be held responsible for or penalized for failing to meet what some considered "intrusive" domestic policy indicators. This would be particularly unfair if they did not receive sufficient external financing to meet them.

These fears almost certainly explain, in part, a good share of the indicators that were dismissed. To be sure, there were 41 of these, and they cover a wide range of topics, without a single throughline. However, an important subset of the discarded metrics relates to domestic climate finance. For example, all the following proposed indicators as highlighted below were binned:

List of domestic climate finance indicators that were rejected at COP30

1. **Proportion of local governments that have integrated climate change adaptation into policies, legal frameworks, budgets, plans and processes**
2. **Number of Parties (countries) with a legal requirement for public investments to take into account climate risks including in planning, implementation and maintenance**
3. **Number of Parties that have systems in place for considering climate risks in public procurement**
4. **Number of Parties where national budgets reflect adaptation allocations across sectors and ministries and where adaptation is integrated into national and sectoral plans (including development plans and budgets where applicable)**
5. **Proportion of government budget allocated to climate adaptation and resilience**
6. **Costs of adaptation actions identified in adopted national adaptation plans, policy instruments, and planning processes and/or strategies**
7. **Annual adaptation finance expenditure**

This set of measures accounted for roughly 17 percent of those that were removed. It is a remarkable list, because it covers most if not all aspects of public finance: from planning and costing to budgeting, expenditure and procurement. At the same time that these indicators were dismissed, indicators related to international finance, technology transfer, and capacity building were approved.

The signal is clear: measuring what the international community contributes was acceptable, but measuring what countries do with this money, and their own budgets, was not. Of course, African countries and other low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are pursuing their interests by pushing for globally focused measures. They may argue: we must keep the pressure on and not allow richer countries to refocus global attention away from what they are financing or failing to finance, toward what we are doing.

Fair enough. Global negotiations are the place to press one's case for what others should do, not to give ground on what one should do at home.

Nevertheless, LMICs need to do more to plan and budget for adaptation finance. From the perspective of their citizens, tracking the extent to which climate adaptation is budgeted for and taken into account across the public finance system is crucial. While crude spending targets have their limitations, it is often impossible to clearly identify adaptation funding in country budgets, as mentioned above.

For example, joint IPF-Bajeti Hub research from 2024 showed that Kenya's adaptation plans were difficult to track in the budget, and, to the extent we could tell, seriously underfunded. Moreover, while the government has committed to rebalancing toward greater adaptation finance in recent years, its new NDC reverses this progress: as IPF analysis shows, the relative share of adaptation financing in the 2031-2035 NDC is actually set to decline relative to the 2020-30 period.

Even if LMICs countries fight hard for greater global flows into adaptation, and even if they succeed, this money will only yield benefits for ordinary people if those countries have set up systems and programs on their own that they can scale up when new resources arrive. Otherwise, these resources may be frittered away on a fragmented mezze platter of donor-driven initiatives, or worse, misused entirely.

The hard truth is that rich countries need to make larger financial contributions to adaptation, but it would be foolish to insist that until they do, LMIC governments will sit on their hands. Africans can walk and chew gum at the same time: demand more from those rich countries that have the resources to support climate adaptation, and simultaneously invest more at home to create locally driven adaptation solutions that can benefit from global flows, if and when they come. And nobody should be afraid of measuring those investments. In fact, it would be wiser to trumpet them.

YEAR 2015

The Paris Agreement on climate change adopted by 195 Parties at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21)

YEAR 2021

Establishment of Expert Groups to develop indicators

YEAR 2025 COP30 in Brazil

100

Number of indicators presented by Expert Group from an original list of thousands

59 **Indicators Approved at COP30**

7 of 41

Rejected indicators were closely linked to domestic finance for adaptation