doi:10.20896/s5542946

EDITORIAL OPEN ACCESS

Broken Consensus at COP31: Fossil-Fuel Politics, Climate Justice and the Humanitarian Stakes of El Niño 2026–27

Rituparna Bhattacharyya[†]

Abstract

COP31 in Antalya closed on 22 November 2026 without agreement on its presidency-led overarching decision. The outcome should not, however, be described as a complete failure: parties reached decisions across several mandated negotiating tracks, including just transition, while action outside the formal negotiations also continued. The rejected political text exposed the difficulty of translating the COP28 commitment to transition away from fossil fuels into a collective pathway, and renewed divisions over adaptation finance and responsibility. This editorial examines the implications for climate diplomacy and India's position.

India's national statement at COP31 foregrounded equity, climate justice, common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC), development rights and the obligation of developed countries to provide climate finance. These arguments remain consequential, but justice must also be translated into credible domestic transitions and adaptation. The World Meteorological Organization's 2026 update places the year among the four warmest on record, with January–September warming of 1.47 ± 0.13°C above the pre-industrial average. Meanwhile, forecasts indicate a strong-to-very-strong El Niño persisting into early 2027. The editorial links these climate signals with documented 2026 heat, fire and flood impacts, while distinguishing event attribution from probabilistic risk. It calls for negotiated outcomes to be clearly separated from voluntary initiatives, and for climate diplomacy to be judged by the emissions reductions, finance, safeguards and implementation it delivers, not unity of language alone, but stronger public accountability. It argues for accountable implementation, accessible finance, fossil-fuel transition, early-warning systems and protection of people most exposed to climate hazards.

Keywords: COP31; Fossil-Fuel Transition; Climate Justice; India; El Niño

[†] Fellow, Royal Geographical Society, United Kingdom; Research Consultant & Editor-in-Chief (Joint), Space and Culture, India, United Kingdom; Senior Fellow, Advance HE, United Kingdom; Series Editor: Gender and Violence, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, United Kingdom; Visiting Professor, University of Science and Technology, Meghalaya, India
Email: rituparna.bhattacharyya@accb.org.uk
©2026 by Bhattacharyya is licensed under CC BY 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Introduction

The climate negotiations in Antalya ended with an uncomfortable lesson: a summit can produce movement in individual workstreams and still fail to deliver a coherent political signal. COP31 closed on 22 November 2026, after its scheduled 20 November end, without consensus on the presidency-led overarching decision (UNFCCC, 2026a, 2026b). Disagreement over the text's treatment of fossil fuels and climate finance became a defining fault line. Yet the conference also reached agreements on several mandated matters, including just-transition work, and reported progress through its parallel action agenda (Evans et al., 2026). Calling COP31 a total failure obscures that distinction; calling it a success would obscure the central political impasse.

The gap between climate science and diplomatic language is increasingly stark. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO) reports that January–September 2026 averaged about 1.47°C above the 1850–1900 baseline, with 2023–2026 on track to be the four warmest years in the instrumental record (WMO, 2026c). This is not the same as a formal crossing of the Paris Agreement's long-term temperature limit, but it is a warning of how narrow the remaining margin is. Heat, fires, floods and El Niño-related risks are not abstract future scenarios; they are already shaping livelihoods, health and public infrastructure.

This editorial considers COP31's unresolved fossil-fuel politics, India's climate-justice position, the summer's extreme events and the emerging El Niño. Its central argument is that consensus has value only when it enables delivery. A negotiated text that avoids the drivers of warming, while failing to make finance accessible, risks becoming a diplomatic exercise detached from people's lives.

COP31: an incomplete outcome, not a complete collapse

The presidency-led "cover decision" did not secure consensus. The proposed text contained no direct reference to transitioning away from fossil fuels, a conspicuous omission in a negotiation where coal, oil and gas remain the principal sources of human-caused greenhouse-gas emissions. The European Union, the United Kingdom and other delegations objected to the draft as inadequate; fossil-fuel-producing countries resisted stronger language. Climate finance was another fault line, particularly the failure to resolve a baseline and quantified pathway for adaptation finance, including the proposed US$120 billion annual figure by 2035 (Evans et al., 2026; Harvey & Readfearn, 2026).

The distinction between draft and adopted text matters. The proposed cover decision was not adopted, so its electrification and carbon-capture language should not be presented as binding COP31 commitments. In parallel, Parties did agree on decisions across several formal tracks, including just transition,[1] adaptation, mitigation, climate finance, technology, transparency and the second Global Stocktake (GST).[2] The Just Transition Work Programme was extended, and work proceeded towards operationalising a just-transition mechanism; these are tangible, if limited, outcomes (UNFCCC, 2026a). Outside the formal negotiations, a voluntary action agenda advanced electrification, with a target of

[1] Just Transition is a policy and governance framework that seeks to achieve environmental sustainability and climate goals while ensuring that the social and economic costs and benefits of the transition are distributed fairly, protecting workers, communities, and vulnerable groups from being left behind. In simple words, like a bridge between an unsustainable past and a greener future, a just transition seeks to ensure that no worker, community, or livelihood is sacrificed in the pursuit of climate goals, balancing environmental transformation with social justice, dignity, and economic security (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023; Heffron & McCauley, 2018; ILO, 2015).

[2] Like a ritual performed every few years, the Global Stocktake returns to measure humanity's collective footsteps on the climate path, judging how far the world has travelled toward mitigation, adaptation, and support goals, and illuminating the course still left in shadow. This Global Stocktake mechanism was established under Article 14 of the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, nd).

electricity reaching 35% of final energy consumption by 2035 supported by a coalition of countries. This initiative is not equivalent to a binding cover decision (Evans et al., 2026).

COP31 therefore leaves a mixed record: a failure to agree an overarching political text alongside continuing technical and sectoral cooperation. The absence of a cover decision does not erase previous agreements, including the Paris Agreement (United Nations, 2015) or the COP28 call to transition away from fossil fuels (UNFCCC, 2023). It does, however, reveal the weakness of a process in which a minimum consensus can be blocked or diluted when the language moves from aspiration to implementation. The political cost is not simply embarrassment; it is a loss of trust among communities and countries that need credible pathways and predictable support.

Fossil-fuel politics and the credibility gap

Fossil-fuel language is not a semantic detail. It names the source of a problem and implies a direction for policy. A transition away from fossil fuels requires changes to production and consumption, energy systems, infrastructure, finance and labour markets. If an overarching text recognises the need to keep warming near 1.5°C yet avoids naming fossil fuels, it risks disconnecting the goal from the mechanism of change. Carbon capture, utilisation and storage may have roles in selected industrial applications, but they cannot be treated as a substitute for rapid emissions reductions or as an open-ended licence to expand fossil-fuel use.

A credible transition must be differentiated and just. Workers and regions dependent on coal, oil and gas need retraining, social protection, economic diversification and participation in decisions. Energy-poor households need reliable and affordable access; industrial economies need clean power, storage, grids and demand-side measures. Climate policy should not be reduced to a binary between fossil-fuel extraction and an immediate, cost-free replacement. But the complexity of transition is also not a reason to avoid the direction of travel. The COP28 global stocktake called for transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems in a just, orderly and equitable manner; that decision remains an agreed reference point, while COP31 failed to strengthen that signal in its proposed overarching text (UNFCCC, 2023).

The finance question is inseparable from the energy question. Countries with limited fiscal space cannot be expected to fund adaptation, resilient infrastructure and energy transitions through expensive debt alone. The unresolved adaptation-finance target, its baseline and the quality of finance— grants versus loans, accessibility, predictability and accountability are therefore material, not technical footnotes. The political credibility of climate action depends on who pays, who benefits, and who bears the risks of transition.

India: climate justice, development and responsibility

India's official national statement at COP31 was unequivocal about equity and climate justice. It argued that the historical emissions of industrialised countries should not translate into an unfair burden on the Global South, and that developing countries cannot be asked to choose between climate action and legitimate development, health, education and decent living standards. The statement reaffirmed common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities (CBDR-RC), called for equitable access to the remaining carbon budget, urged developed countries to fulfil climate-finance obligations and opposed unilateral trade measures that penalise developing countries under the guise of climate action (India, 2026; Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2026).

This position is grounded in the UN climate regime's equity architecture. It insists that ambition must be matched by means of implementation—finance, technology, capacity and support—and that the transition should not reproduce colonial patterns of resource extraction or shift costs onto countries and populations with lower historical responsibility. These are serious claims, particularly where climate impacts are already undermining food security, public health, infrastructure and development gains.

Nevertheless, equity is not a reason to postpone action at home. India's energy transition must be assessed against its development needs, energy security, affordability and emissions trajectory, while also recognising the health and environmental costs of coal dependence and the opportunities presented by renewable energy, electrification, efficiency, storage and grid investment. A justice-based diplomatic position is strongest when it is accompanied by transparent domestic progress, credible implementation, protection for workers and vulnerable households, and adaptation investments.

India should also avoid being treated as a single voice for the Global South. Small island states, least-developed countries, African states, emerging economies and fossil-fuel exporters have overlapping but not identical priorities. India's advocacy can help bridge these differences by advancing public finance, technology access, resilient infrastructure and a just transition without weakening the need for measurable emissions reductions. Climate justice should be a framework for sharing responsibility and enabling action—not a rhetorical shield for every national policy choice.

The warming signal—and what 1.5°C means

The IPCC's assessment is clear that human activities, principally greenhouse-gas emissions, have unequivocally caused global warming and that climate impacts are already widespread (IPCC, 2023). The WMO's 2026 update reports an average warming of 1.47 ± 0.13°C for January–September, based on nine datasets, and identifies 2023–2026 as the four warmest years on record (WMO, 2026c). Copernicus data also show months in 2026 exceeding 1.5°C relative to the pre-industrial baseline (Copernicus Climate Change Service, 2026a). These short-term monthly or annual exceedances must not be conflated with the Paris Agreement's long-term temperature goal, assessed using a multi-decadal average (IPCC, 2022). A single year above 1.5°C does not, by itself, establish that the long-term threshold has been crossed.

This distinction is important but should not become reassurance. The climate system is accumulating heat; the oceans absorb most of the excess energy, sea levels continue to rise, and extreme heat is increasing risks to health, ecosystems and infrastructure. A temporary monthly or annual temperature anomaly can still have devastating consequences. The challenge is to explain climate indicators accurately while conveying the urgency of limiting cumulative emissions.

Climate change also does not make every flood, wildfire or heatwave inevitable, nor does it mean each event can be attributed to warming without analysis. Attribution science examines how climate change alters the likelihood or intensity of specific events. For policy, however, the broader evidence is already compelling: a warmer atmosphere and ocean change the probabilities, duration, intensity and compounding of hazards, making preparedness and risk reduction essential (IPCC, 2022, 2023).

Summer 2026: heat, fire and flood

The summer's events show how hazards cascade across regions and social systems. Copernicus reported that June–July 2026 was the hottest such period on record for western Europe, with prolonged heat and drought creating conditions favourable to extreme wildfires. Dryness was especially severe across parts of the Iberian Peninsula, France, Germany, Austria and Hungary; low soil moisture and river flows affected water supply, irrigation and energy production (Copernicus Climate Change Service, 2026b). These conditions should not be read as proof that climate change caused each fire, but as evidence of the increasingly dangerous background conditions in which fires develop and spread.

Flooding presents the other side of the risk spectrum. WMO reported severe monsoon flooding in Bangladesh, with Cox's Bazar District, where refugee camps are located, among the hardest-hit areas. Flash floods affected Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, while flooding following Typhoon Noul in China prompted the evacuation of about 700,000 people (WMO, 2026a). Similarly, in July, a cloudburst in Nagaland, coupled with incessant rainfall, triggered flash floods across Upper Assam,

submerging homes, tea estates, and railway infrastructure, thus transforming the region into a river. The devastation has renewed concerns over embankment failures, inadequate early-warning systems, and the growing impacts of climate change (Bhattacharyya, 2026). These examples underline the uneven geography of vulnerability: exposure, housing quality, livelihood dependence, mobility, access to warnings, health services and the capacity to recover determine how weather hazards become disasters.

Heat, drought, fire, flood and smoke can compound rather than occur in isolation. Fire destroys homes and livelihoods, smoke increases respiratory risks, drought strains water and power systems, and flooding can damage sanitation, transport and food stocks. The most affected are often outdoor workers, informal settlements, older people, children, people with disabilities, displaced populations and households with few resources to evacuate or rebuild. Disaster statistics alone cannot capture these cumulative burdens. They demand investment in public health, safe housing, water, resilient infrastructure, accessible warnings and social protection.

El Niño 2026–27: heightened risk, not a prophecy

El Niño is a natural climate phenomenon involving warmer-than-average sea-surface temperatures in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific and changes in atmospheric circulation. It shifts probabilities of rainfall and temperature anomalies, but its effects vary by region and season and are modified by other climate drivers, including the Indian Ocean Dipole and local conditions. It is a naturally occurring climate mode, not a direct consequence of anthropogenic warming; nevertheless, it unfolds against a warmer baseline and can temporarily raise global mean temperature (IPCC, 2023; WMO, 2026b).

The WMO's October update anticipated a December peak and nearly 100% likelihood of persistence through February 2027; NOAA's Climate Prediction Center, in its 12 November discussion, judged a strong-to-very-strong event likely through January–March 2027 with a probability above 79%, while estimating roughly 60% odds of a historic event under its defined threshold. These probabilities are not interchangeable: they refer to different forecast products, periods and definitions of event strength. They are forecasts, not guarantees of impacts (NOAA Climate Prediction Center, 2026; WMO, 2026b).

The humanitarian implications are significant. A strong El Niño can heighten heat stress, alter rainfall, increase drought risk in some places and intensify flooding in others. Agriculture may face crop losses, disrupted planting, reduced soil moisture, livestock stress and volatile food prices. Water scarcity can affect households, sanitation, hydropower and industrial production. Extreme heat raises occupational and health risks, particularly where housing, electricity, cooling and medical access are inadequate. In India and across South Asia, seasonal outlooks must be interpreted locally rather than assuming a uniform monsoon outcome; the Indian Ocean Dipole, intraseasonal variability and regional circulation can modify El Niño's influence.

The appropriate response is anticipatory action: update seasonal risk assessments, protect water and food systems, strengthen heat-health plans, prepare flood and drought contingencies, make warnings accessible in local languages and ensure that social protection can scale rapidly. El Niño is a risk multiplier, not a prediction that every region will experience disaster. The difference between forecast risk and realised harm is partly determined by preparation, infrastructure and public institutions.

Climate diplomacy beyond the lowest common denominator

COP31's impasse raises legitimate questions about consensus. Consensus protects the participation and sovereignty of all Parties, including countries whose interests might otherwise be marginalised. But a process that allows an overarching text to be blocked, or its ambition diluted until it no longer names the central driver of warming, can undermine trust. Reform should not simply replace consensus

with majority voting; it should examine transparent facilitation, clearer mandates, better sequencing, accountability for implementation and ways to prevent procedural deadlock from erasing agreed work.

The conference also shows why the Action Agenda and negotiated process must be connected. Voluntary initiatives, investment, electrification and national transition roadmaps can advance, but they cannot substitute for fair rules, finance, reporting and collective accountability. Conversely, formal decisions have little value if governments and institutions fail to implement them. The second global stocktake, launched at COP31 and due to conclude at COP33 in 2028, must be used to evaluate not only pledges but actual delivery and support (UNFCCC, 2026a).

A stronger diplomatic agenda would put fossil-fuel transition pathways, adaptation, loss and damage, public climate finance and accountability in the same frame. It would recognise different starting points and capacities while demanding credible plans from all major emitters. Climate diplomacy should also resist the false choice between mitigation and adaptation: reducing emissions lowers future risk, while adaptation protects people from impacts that are already unavoidable.

A human-centred climate agenda

A human-centred agenda begins with the people who experience climate risk, rather than with headline pledges alone. Heat-health plans need labour protections, cooling access, public-health surveillance, urban shade and reliable electricity. Flood resilience requires drainage, river and wetland restoration, safe shelters, transport continuity, warning systems and relocation safeguards where necessary. Drought policy must protect drinking water, farmers, pastoralists and ecosystems while improving water governance. These measures should be funded, locally designed, maintained and evaluated.

Climate finance must be predictable and accessible, especially for adaptation and loss and damage. Grants and concessional finance are essential where debt would deepen vulnerability. Institutions should simplify application procedures, strengthen direct access for local actors and report transparently on whether resources reach communities. A financial target without a baseline, accounting rules or delivery schedule is not a meaningful guarantee.

Just transition must likewise be concrete: worker protections, retraining, regional development, energy affordability, public participation and safeguards for communities affected by extraction or infrastructure. Renewable energy expansion needs grid upgrades, storage, responsible mineral sourcing, biodiversity protection and consultation. Carbon removal and capture technologies may contribute in limited contexts, but their performance, cost, permanence and risks must be independently assessed; they cannot justify delayed emissions cuts.

The WMO notes that multi-hazard early-warning coverage has expanded, but gaps remain. Warnings only save lives when people receive them, trust them, understand them and can act. Investments in community-based preparedness, accessible communications, evacuation transport, shelters and health services should be treated as essential infrastructure. Climate justice is measured in reduced deaths, safer homes, protected livelihoods and the ability to recover, not solely in the language of diplomatic declarations.

Conclusion: the world cannot afford a hollow consensus

COP31's unresolved cover decision is a setback, but not the end of climate cooperation. The summit's other decisions and action-agenda initiatives show that work can continue; the absence of a political pact shows how fragile that work remains when countries cannot agree on the fossil-fuel transition and the means to finance it. The Paris Agreement and previous commitments remain in force. They need implementation, not rhetorical retreat.

India's insistence on equity, historical responsibility, CBDR-RC and finance is

indispensable to a fair global response. Its credibility will grow when that advocacy is matched by sustained domestic progress and an inclusive transition. Developed countries, meanwhile, cannot demand ambition without delivering support.

The extreme events of 2026 and the strengthening El Niño forecast point to a future in which hazards are increasingly intertwined with inequality. The task is not to dramatise uncertainty, but to act responsibly within it: cut emissions, prepare for risks, finance adaptation, protect those most exposed and hold institutions accountable. A consensus that cannot speak clearly about fossil fuels or deliver finance is hollow. A climate agreement worthy of the name must be judged by whether it helps people live safer, healthier and more dignified lives on a warming planet.

References

Bhattacharyya, R., Sarma, P.K. & Das, T.K. (2023). Mass exodus of India's internal migrant labourers during the first phase of COVID-19: a critical analysis. *SN Social Science*. 3, 108. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00691-x

Bhattacharyya, Rituparna (2026). When Nature Testifies. *India Today NE*. https://www.indiatodayne.in/opinion/story/when-nature-testifies-1428890-2026-07-23

Copernicus Climate Change Service. (2026a, November 5). Copernicus: Warmest October on record with 2026 virtually certain to exceed 1.5°C. https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-warmest-october-record-2026-virtually-certain-exceed-15degc

Copernicus Climate Change Service. (2026b, August 12). Exceptionally hot and dry conditions fuel wildfires in Europe as ocean surface temperatures reach record highs for July. https://climate.copernicus.eu/exceptionally-hot-and-dry-conditions-fuel-wildfires-europe-ocean-surface-temperatures-reach-record

Evans, S., Dunne, D., Gabbatiss, J., Lempriere, M., Patel, A., Viglione, G., Chandrasekhar, A., & Dwyer, O. (2026, November 23). COP31: Key outcomes agreed at the UN climate talks in Antalya. *Carbon Brief*. https://www.carbonbrief.org/cop31-key-outcomes-agreed-at-the-un-climate-talks-in-antalya

Harvey, F., & Readfearn, G. (2026, November 22). COP31 failed but in 'the real world' the transition away from fossil fuels is inevitable. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/nov/22/cop31-failed-transition-away-from-fossil-fuels-inevitable

Heffron, R.J., & McCauley, D. (2018). What is 'Just Transition'? *Geoforum*. 88,74–77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.11.016

India. (2026, November 18). *National statement: India (COP 31 high-level segment)*. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/INDIA_cop31cmp21cma8_HLS_ENG.pdf

International Labor Organization (ILO) (2015). *Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all*. https://www.ilo.org/publications/guidelines-just-transition-towards-environmentally-sustainable-economies

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022). *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2023). *Climate change 2023: Synthesis report*. https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647

Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. (2026, November 18). India calls for equity, climate justice and fulfilment of climate finance obligations at UNFCCC COP31, at Antalya (Türkiye). *Press Information Bureau*.

https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2337813

NOAA Climate Prediction Center. (2026, November 12). El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO): Diagnostic discussion. National Weather Service. https://cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/analysis_monitoring/enso_advisory/ensodisc.html

United Nations. (2015). *Paris Agreement*. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/Paris_agreement-English.pdf

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2026a, November 23). *COP31 delivers important progress across negotiations and Action Agenda, advancing implementation, but fails to agree Presidency-Led Decision*. https://unfccc.int/news/cop31-delivers-important-progress-across-negotiations-and-action-agenda-advancing-implementation-but

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2026b). *UN climate change conference—Antalya, November 2026*. https://unfccc.int/cop31

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (2023, December 13). *COP28 agreement signals 'beginning of the end' of the fossil fuel era.* https://unfccc.int/news/cop28-agreement-signals-beginning-of-the-end-of-the-fossil-fuel-era

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). (n.d.). Frequently asked questions about the global stocktake. UNFCCC. https://unfccc.int/topics/global-stocktake/about-the-global-stocktake/frequently-asked-questions-about-the-global-stocktake

World Meteorological Organization (WMO). (2026a, August 12). *Record-breaking heat and extreme weather continue*. https://wmo.int/media/news/record-breaking-heat-and-extreme-weather-continue

World Meteorological Organization (WMO). (2026b, October 8). *Sea-surface temperatures reflect strengthening El Niño.* https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/sea-surface-temperatures-reflect-strengthening-el-nino

World Meteorological Organization (WMO). (2026c, November 9). *State of the climate in 2026 gives new meaning to phrase 'off the charts'.* https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/state-of-climate-2026-gives-new-meaning-phrase-charts

Ethics statement

This is a non-empirical perspective based on publicly available sources. It did not involve human participants, human data or animal subjects; no research ethics approval was sought. I also confirm that the manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration elsewhere.

Conflict of Interest

I have no conflict of Interest to declare

AI-Assisted Writing Disclosure

I used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement and the location and review of publicly accessible sources. All factual assertions, source records, and bibliographic references were independently checked and verified by me, and I am solely responsible for the accuracy and interpretation.

Informed Consent

Not applicable; this editorial involves no human participants.

Data Availability

No original datasets were generated or analysed for this perspective; the analysis draws on publicly available sources cited in the manuscript.

Funding

This editorial is self-funded.