

Time's up for the warming target

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COP30, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, was held in Brazil in November 2025. Before COP30, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres delivered a devastating assessment of humanity's progress towards limiting global warming to only $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$, saying, 'Let's recognise our failure. The truth is that we have failed to avoid an overshooting above 1.5°C in the next few years. And that going above 1.5°C has devastating consequences.' So, asks **Cameron Dunn**, where does the world go from here?

Targets to limit climate warming have a long history. In the 1990s it was widely argued that warming needed to be limited to $+2^{\circ}\text{C}$. The target was adopted by Germany as a national target as long ago as 1996. Leading up to COP15 (Copenhagen, 2009) $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ began to emerge as a new target. This is because vulnerable Small Island States and Least Developed Countries argued $+2^{\circ}\text{C}$ would lead to devastating sea-level rise and extreme weather events, and that $+2^{\circ}\text{C}$ was essentially a 'western developed world' target ignoring the climate reality in many low-income countries.

By COP21 (Paris, 2015) the $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ target had become widely accepted in political circles and was adopted by the 2015 Paris Agreement. At the time

many scientists were sceptical, believing the chances of limiting warming to only $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ were slight. A report by the IPCC in 2018, SR15, made the scientific case for the $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ target and since then it has been part of the conversation about climate change.

Warning signs

Since 2020 it has become increasingly clear that the $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ warming target would not be achieved:

- The 10-year period 2015–24 was 1.26°C warmer than the pre-industrial average.
- 2023, 2024 and 2025 (provisionally) were the hottest 3 years since modern climate records began over 175 years ago.
- 2024 was 1.55°C above the pre-industrial global average.

During COP30, Global Carbon Project released data showing that global CO_2 emissions from fossil fuels are projected to increase by 1.1% in 2025 and reach a record high of 38.1 billion tonnes. In other words, both carbon emission trends and recorded temperatures suggest limiting warming to $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ is virtually impossible.

Weakening resolve

Referring to the relative international unity to tackle climate change when the Paris Agreement was signed, UK prime minister Kier Starmer said at COP30, 'Today however, sadly, that consensus is gone.' While acknowledging the scientific consensus, Starmer's comments identify a growing political weakness of purpose and perhaps a resignation that the $+1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ target is not now achievable.

The leaders of the world’s three largest greenhouse gas emitters – China, the USA and India – are not attending COP30. In many countries politicians have their hands full dealing with the cost-of-living crisis, rising nationalism, world trade turmoil and conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. Perhaps we should not be surprised that climate change action has slipped from the top of the agenda.

A new target?

Despite missing the +1.5°C target, ordinary people around the world are still concerned about the threat of climate change. A Pew Global Attitudes survey in 2025 found an average of 67% of people in 25 countries considered climate change a ‘major threat’. However, in some high-income countries the proportion who consider it a major threat has declined recently (see Figure 1). Conversely, in most middle-income countries people continue to perceive an increasing threat.

The world has several options post-COP30:

- 1 Continue to push for the +1.5°C target, with the increasing risk of failure and a chance that more stakeholders become disillusioned with the negotiation process.
- 2 Set a new target such as +2°C, but with the risk of ‘kicking the can down the road’ only to fail again in the future.

% saying climate change is a major threat to their country		2013	2018	2025	Change 2018–25
High-income	Italy	64	71	71	0
	UK	48	66	66	0
	South Korea	85	86	77	-11
	Germany	56	71	67	-4
	Japan	72	75	78	+3
	USA	40	59	51	-8
Middle-income	Mexico	52	80	74	-6
	Indonesia	59	56	65	+9
	Nigeria	41	41	54	+13
	Brazil	76	72	77	+5

Figure 1 Pew Global Attitudes survey results, 2013–25

- 3 Completely rework the global system of COP meetings and climate negotiations – but is there an appetite for this, and could a workable model be found?
- 4 Accept that the best option may be to adapt to a future warmer world, rather than spend more time on mitigation.

Also released to coincide with COP30 was Climate Action Tracker’s latest assessment of global emissions reduction progress. It concluded that the world is still on track for ‘catastrophic’ warming of +2.6°C. The appetite to take action may have weakened, but the need to take action has not.

Questions

- 1 Was the +1.5°C target set as part of the 2015 Paris Agreement the right target?
- 2 Should the countries that are still serious about emissions reductions just push forward with them, in the hope that other countries can be persuaded to act in the future?
- 3 Look at the four post-COP30 options. Which, if any, do you think the world should pursue? Are there other actions that might be more successful?

Further research

Use these links to explore some of the issues in greater depth:

- The 2018 IPCC Special Report on limiting warming to 1.5°C: www.ipcc.ch/sr15
- Global Carbon Budget tracks carbon emissions: www.globalcarbonproject.org
- Pew Research Centre climate change results: <https://tinyurl.com/vhaytwuj>
- Climate Action Tracker 2025 update: <https://tinyurl.com/ns3hvdj6>

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