

## Commentary

# What a visit to the Amazon taught this youth delegate about climate action

**Zaheer Abdul Malik**

BELEM, Brazil – A defining experience of my time in Belem for the UN climate change conference COP30 took place outside the negotiation halls.

During the summit, which ran from Nov 10 to 22, I watched countries debate the wording of responsibilities and timelines, sometimes focusing on a single phrase or paragraph.

But it was the encounters I had with the locals living in the nearby Amazon rainforest that helped me realise how these discussions translate into actual consequences for people.

During a learning journey to Combu Island, an island in the Amazon rainforest near Belem, I listened to locals describing how climate change affected their lives.

Residents pointed to watermarks showing how the river has risen. A farmer described how açaí, a berry consumed in the region, no longer ripens predictably. Parents shared that sudden floods make it difficult for teachers from Belem City to travel to Combu Island to teach local youth.

Before I left, a resident named

Luca placed his ring in my hand as a keepsake of the time we spent together. He said: “Tell your friends in Singapore not to forget about our people.”

**THE UN CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS**

The annual UN climate conferences bring around 200 countries together to negotiate how the world should respond to climate change.

The decisions made there can influence national policies and shape how communities experience climate impact in their daily lives.

Prior to attending COP30, my understanding of climate change negotiations and agreements was limited to policy readings and the classes I attended.

However, observing negotiations in person was eye-opening, as the discussions can be complex, deliberate, and nuanced, with even slight changes in wording carrying significant implications.

The outcome of these negotiations shapes how countries act, how much support they receive, and how fairly responsibilities are shared.

During my time at COP30 from Nov 17 to 21, I attended events at pavilions and participated in side

events.

I also had the opportunity to deliver the youth programme with other youth delegates at the Singapore Pavilion.

For instance, I facilitated a dialogue with Mr Fahad Haider, an Australian delegate and renewable energy engineer. He shared stories from Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea, where he helped install affordable solar systems in remote communities.

By training residents to maintain and repair the systems themselves, he ensured that the technology supported their daily needs, from lighting to cooking to food storage in a sustainable and empowering way.

After our session, he invited me to explore working together on community-based solar projects in Indonesia.

During COP30, I also observed negotiation sessions at the conference, including one on the Just Transition Work Programme.

This refers to a UN initiative to ensure that climate action is fair and inclusive, and that workers and communities – especially those working in fossil fuel sectors – are protected in the green shift.

Negotiations on this issue were co-chaired by Singapore’s chief negotiator for climate change, Mr

Joseph Teo, together with Italy’s Ms Federica Fracano.

During the session, countries expressed differing views on the framework, and negotiations carried on until a consensus was reached among all parties.

I wish I could have stayed longer to observe how the discussion developed, but the negotiations continued late into the night.

What stood out to me was how Mr Teo co-facilitated the discussion with poise, ensuring that all sides were heard and that the discussions progressed. It gave me a clearer appreciation of the patience, fairness, and leadership needed in climate diplomacy.

Still, the significance of these discussions did not set in for me, until my visit to Combu Island.

**BEYOND CONFERENCE HALLS**

On Combu Island, rising river levels due to unpredictable rainfall patterns and floods were impacting lives and livelihoods, locals said.

The increasing unpredictability of weather patterns is among the impacts of climate change, according to scientists.

Flood cycles were unpredictable, affecting children’s education and work patterns. Long dry spells reduced

harvesting of fruit such as açaí. Riverbank erosion damaged homes.

My learnings from the residents of Combu Island reinforced my perspective that climate shifts not only alter environments, but they also disrupt food systems, incomes, and the routines that provide stability and dignity.

Combu Island was an outdoor classroom for us.

Meeting local communities in the Amazon made me think about the families I have met in Singapore.

Through my involvement in NUS SAVE, an environmental group at the university, and Al-Mizan Singapore, which is a non-profit network to empower Muslim communities to be more sustainable, I have taken part in community projects that aim to understand practical climate issues on the ground.

In Singapore, the impact of climate effects appears more muted and less dramatic as governmental measures moderate the brunt of the impacts on communities.

For example, a family with no access to air-conditioning at home once shared with me that their children showered several times a day just to feel comfortable.

But measures have been rolled out to help people cope with the rising temperatures.

For instance, the Government has offered climate-friendly household vouchers to families here to offset the cost of buying more energy- or water-efficient equipment.

Singapore has also been studying these issues through initiatives like the Urban Redevelopment Authority’s

Shaping a Heat Resilient City research, which examines how building layout, materials, greenery and wind flow influence thermal comfort.

My experience at COP30 has helped me see how climate change is tackled at different levels.

The climate negotiations shape long-term plans and galvanise international support for climate action, while communities have to find ways to cope with climate change impacts in their homes and livelihoods.

Learning how climate change is addressed at both these levels showed me that responding to climate change involves many stakeholders.

What has become clearer to me following my experience at COP30 is the role that youth can play in connecting these two spaces by sharing observations, asking questions, and supporting practical efforts that improve daily life.

Luca’s message from Combu Island remains with me. Listening to communities will continue to guide how I contribute.

What we do next in our schools, communities, and daily lives is crucial in translating these lessons to impacting real change.

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