

CSSN Briefing

CSSN Primer 2025:1 Climate Obstruction in the UNFCCC

Obstruction has become a defining feature of the UNFCCC process, shaping both the pace and substance of global climate agreements. It is often subtle and context-specific, making it difficult for negotiators, observers, and civil society to identify obstruction tactics in real time and even harder to counter effectively.

This policy brief introduces a typology of 14 obstruction tactics, shows where they are most likely to appear during different stages of the UNFCCC negotiations, and highlights how they may emerge at COP30, with the aim of equipping actors to better recognize, anticipate, and respond to efforts that could undermine climate ambition.

What is climate obstruction?

Any discourse, practice, or omission by a Party or non-Party stakeholder in the UNFCCC that delays, weakens, or avoids strategies intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance resilience to climate impacts in an effective and equitable way. This working definition is intended to be descriptive rather than normative; it is designed to help recognize obstruction in practice, by considering any behavior obstructive when it runs counter to the UNFCCC's core objective of preventing dangerous human interference with the climate system.

- **Obstruction is rarely straightforward:** it can take the form of procedural maneuvers, strategic framings of substantive content, clear rejection, or deliberate inaction.¹ What looks like legitimate progress in one context may also be seen as obstruction in another.
- **Obstruction is not static:** it has taken different forms across the history of the Convention, adapting to new issues and political contexts. In the early years, climate change denialism and outright rejection of commitments were predominant. More recently, obstruction is more subtly deployed, such as through manipulating agendas, contesting definitions of climate finance, narrowing the interpretation of equity, or resisting stronger accountability mechanisms.
- **Obstruction is uneven:** while a range of actors may obstruct when national or sectoral interests outweigh collective goals, its form and impact reflect power asymmetries. Wealthier and fossil-fuel-producing countries have historically exercised disproportionate influence in setting agendas, slowing progress, and making access more difficult for less-resourced Parties.

Understanding obstruction is critical as climate governance depends on coordination. Even limited forms of delay or dilution can significantly widen the implementation gap, translating into outcomes such as weakened targets, inadequate ambition for mitigation, adaptation, and means of implementation, and an overall erosion of trust in the negotiation process.

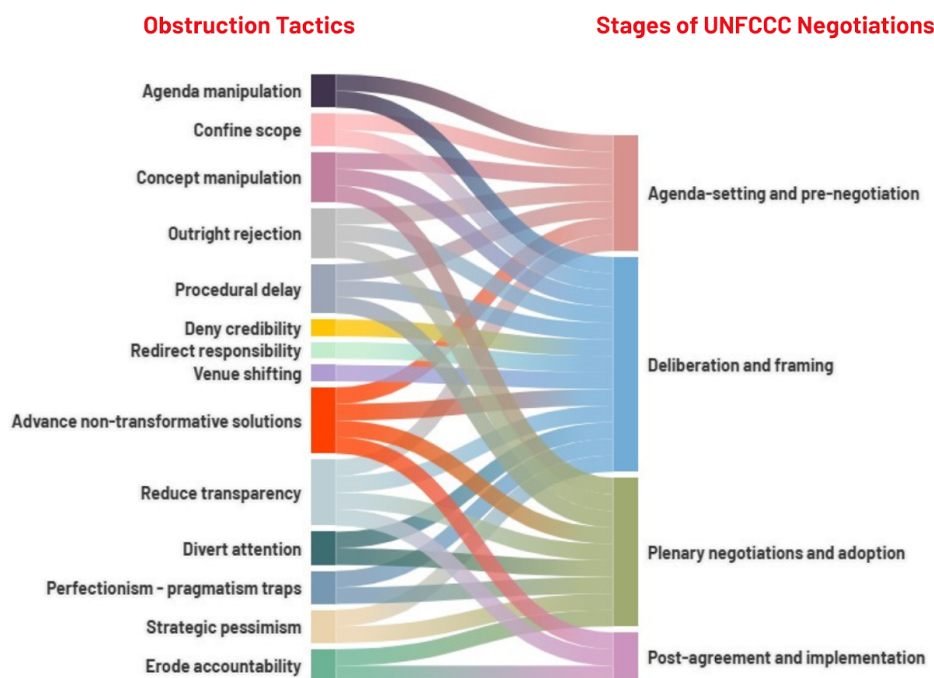
Here we present a typology of 14 key obstruction tactics² that actors deploy during UNFCCC negotiations, organized along a spectrum from more to less overt forms of obstruction:



Tactic	Description of tactic	Illustration in negotiations ³
Outright rejection	Blocks proposed text or rejects the legitimacy of negotiation outcomes, including refusing participation in the process itself	Parties have repeatedly vetoed references to fossil fuels in UNFCCC texts, arguing the Convention is “not an energy treaty”
Deny credibility	Undermines legitimacy or scientific consensus by claiming insufficient knowledge to weaken the basis for stronger action	At SB62, several Parties reduced recognition of WMO climate reports to a neutral “take note,” blocking stronger “with concern” language on the report’s conclusions and avoiding references to the 1.5°C goal
Strategic pessimism	Claims transformation is impossible or futile, uses misinformation or misrepresentations of science (when objections are really political or economic) to justify inaction	At COP29, developed countries cited limited fiscal space to argue greater climate finance was unfeasible, even as many simultaneously raised military spending
Redirect responsibility	Argues other actors (states, non-state actors, or consumers) should act first, claiming climate leadership leads to free-riding	Several countries have justified withdrawing from the Convention or its agreements by claiming it was ineffective
Agenda manipulation	Manipulates what is negotiated by excluding or siloing issues, holding agenda items hostage, or blocking alignment across processes	Excluding loss and damage from Subsidiary Body meeting agendas post-Paris
Erode accountability	Blocks data collection or reporting to prevent the issue from being tracked or reconsidered	Since COP28, some Parties have blocked efforts to track progress toward stocktake targets and implementation of the fossil-fuel transition
Divert attention	Invoking social justice, economic, or well-being arguments to distract from inaction in the relevant governance space	Developed Parties often highlight non-state action and funding, especially in NCQG debates, to deflect attention from weak national commitments to public finance
Advance non-transformative solutions	Rejects binding rules or transformative measures by framing (future) technologies or voluntary measures as sufficient	At COP26, Parties promoted emissions reduction frameworks reliant on CCS and fossil-based technologies while resisting binding global phase-out commitments for fossil fuels
Procedural delay	Strategic use of organizational rules, logistics, and procedural authority to consume time, keep issues in dialogue or workshops, feign confusion, or reopen questions, thereby stalling concrete decisions	Parties delay decisions through lengthy interventions, overnight sessions, citing issues in document translation, or pushing items to future meetings under Rule 16
Concept manipulation	Dilutes agreed terms, reopens or reshapes definitions, or reframes issues into more acceptable components, often through vague language, selective citation of past texts, and signaling ambition while sidestepping binding commitments	Loss and damage debates tracing back to Vanuatu’s 1991 call for compensation have long been avoided and diluted to avoid liability
Reduce transparency	Restricts participation of Parties, observers, and/or media by limiting access or resources, using parallel meetings, poor logistics, and all-night sessions that deter engagement	Negotiations often shift into multiple and/or closed meetings, excluding observers from key moments of the negotiation process
Venue shifting	Moves issues to alternative fora or workstreams to restrict scope, delay decisions, or deflect substantive action	Developed countries argued at SB62 that Article 9.1 finance obligations were already addressed elsewhere, blocking its inclusion as a separate agenda item
Confine scope	Narrows the framing of an issue to exclude its political, distributive, or financial dimensions	Developed countries often confine adaptation agenda items to narrow technical questions, blocking discussions on scale, predictability, and the grant-based obligations of finance under Article 9.1
Perfectionism - pragmatism traps	Insists on a faultless policy before taking action; alternatively, limits ambition to only what seems politically feasible (“take what you can get”)	The search for a ‘perfect’ set of universally applicable adaptation indicators, with negotiators debating thousands of options, definitions, and methodologies, has stalled progress on the Global Goal for Adaptation

When and where does obstruction appear during the UNFCCC negotiations?

Obstruction can surface at every stage of the negotiations, on any agenda item or decision, from early agenda-setting through to implementation and evaluation. While some tactics are specific to certain stages, others recur throughout the process. How overt they appear often depends on the setting, such as informal-informal meetings without observers where these behaviors may be more easily exposed. The following figure maps the obstruction tactics across different stages of the negotiation process, illustrating when they are most likely to emerge and how several may recur across multiple stages.



Anticipating obstruction at COP30

Thirty years of COP negotiations and a decade since the Paris Agreement, Belém's COP30 is symbolically charged. The Brazilian Presidency is presenting this year's conference as a reset to increase the effectiveness of negotiations and to accelerate implementation. Yet given recent trends, obstruction tactics are likely to re-emerge across this year's major agenda items:

- **Global Goal on Adaptation:** risks of delay through demands for perfectly measurable targets (*perfectionism-pragmatism trap*), wasting time by foregrounding procedural concerns (*procedural delay*), or keeping the goal broad and aspirational to avoid binding obligations (*concept manipulation*).
- **Forests:** promotion of offsets and market-based solutions instead of strong deforestation targets (*advance non-transformative solutions*), and deflection by highlighting deforestation in the Global South to distract from Global North fossil fuel phase-out (*redirect responsibility*).
- **Fossil Fuels:** continued fights over language after the COP30 Presidency's Action Agenda³ included 'transition away' from fossil fuels (*outright rejection*, *perfectionism-pragmatism trap*) and opposition to considering this issue in the Mitigation Work Programme (*agenda manipulation*).
- **Finance:** ongoing disputes over Article 9.1 (*venue shifting*, *agenda manipulation*), the Baku to Belém roadmap, which may be more rhetorical than substantive (*strategic ambiguity*).
- **Loss & Damage:** with the fund now established, disputes could arise over its scale, contributors, and scope (*venue shifting*, *perfectionism-pragmatism trap*, *redirect responsibility*).
- **Global Stocktake:** during the refinement stage, debates over the IPCC's role and authority shaped how findings would be used (*deny credibility*). In the subsequent UAE Dialogue, disagreements

over scope—particularly whether finance should be the main or one of the main focuses—risked narrowing the agenda and deflecting attention from the weak ambition of Nationally Determined Contributions submitted this year (*confine scope, divert attention*).

- **Just Transition:** expectation for cover decisions that advance the Just Transition Work Programme, and disagreements about trade-restrictive unilateral measures (*confining scope, concept manipulation*).

Obstruction is also likely to resurface beyond the formal agenda in relation to broader dynamics shaping the negotiations, such as:

- **International Court of Justice advisory opinion:** the recent ruling affirmed states' obligations to prevent harm and limit fossil fuels, but some Parties may downplay its relevance by stressing its non-binding nature (*deny credibility*) or moving relevant discussions to side forums rather than COP decisions (*venue shifting, agenda manipulation*).
- **Geopolitical context:** the absence of the US delegation may push other developed countries to be less ambitious (*redirect responsibility, strategic pessimism*). Ongoing wars and cost-of-living crises may continue to be invoked as constraints on taking action, especially on finance (*strategic pessimism, perfectionism-pragmatism trap*).
- **Human rights, Indigenous rights, and participation:** Indigenous and human rights could become a flashpoint. Some states may attempt to bracket or minimize rights language in decisions (*concept dilution, deny credibility*), even as civil society presses for stronger integration.

Anticipating obstruction is key to ensuring COP30 delivers on its symbolic weight as a turning point in the global climate regime. Familiar tactics are likely to resurface, and the Brazilian Presidency and allies can counter these moves through strong agenda discipline, building coalitions across negotiating blocs, further embedding science into the negotiation process, and mobilizing public and diplomatic pressure when obstruction is most blatant. By identifying these tactics in advance, COP30 can limit their impact and keep negotiations focused on substance and ambition above all else.

¹ Roberts, J. Timmons, Carlos R. S. Milani, Jennifer Jacquet, and Christian Downie, eds. 2025. *Climate Obstruction: A Global Assessment*. Oxford University Press.

² These tactics draw on the following research: De Pryck, Kari, Eduardo Viola et al. 2025. "Obstruction in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change." In *Climate Obstruction: A Global Assessment*, edited by J. Timmons Roberts, Carlos R. S. Milani, Jennifer Jacquet, and Christian Downie. Oxford University Press; Falzon, Danielle, Fred Shaia, J. Timmons Roberts, et al. 2023. "Tactical Opposition: Obstructing Loss and Damage Finance in the United Nations Climate Negotiations." *Global Environmental Politics* 23 (3): 95–119. https://doi.org/10.1162/glep_a_00722; Lamb, William F., Giulio Mattioli, Sebastian Levi, et al. 2020. "Discourses of Climate Delay." *Global Sustainability* 3 (January): e17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/sus.2020.13>.

³ These illustrations are sourced from the above research, *Earth Negotiations Bulletins*, and our own observations.

⁴ COP30 Presidency. 2025. "Action Agenda." Accessed September 17, 2025. <https://cop30.br/en/action-agenda>.

This briefing paper was produced with contributions from the Working Group on Obstruction in the UNFCCC and IPCC of the CSSN, led by Dr. Kari De Pryck and Dr. Danielle Falzon.

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About CSSN

This report is being released through the Climate Social Science Network ([CSSN.org](https://cssn.org)), a global network of scholars headquartered at the [Institute at Brown for Environment and Society](https://brown.edu/en/centers/institute-at-brown-for-environment-and-society). CSSN seeks to coordinate, conduct and support peer-reviewed research into the institutional and cultural dynamics of the political conflict over climate change, and assist scholars in outreach to policymakers and the public.