

Belém as a test of a new model of forest finance

The climate summit that was held in Belém, Brazil in November 2025, refocused renewed global attention to a difficult but unavoidable truth: protecting tropical forests requires more than ambitious pledges – it requires a fundamental shift in who holds power over those forests. As world leaders gathered in the Amazon city, the signature initiative was Brazil's Tropical Forest Forever Facility (TFFF), or a finance mechanism presented as a paradigm shift in global conservation. Yet, amid the flurry of announcements and diplomacy, persistent tensions revealed that major challenges remain around participation, equity and accountability.

The difference

The TFFF proposes to compensate countries for maintaining standing forests, not just for avoiding deforestation. As reported, the Fund has already secured more than \$5.5 billion in initial commitments, including a \$3 billion pledge from Norway. Unlike many past funds, it is not structured purely as a donation vehicle. Rather, it is set up to generate returns and reward long-term forest conservation. Critically, at least 20% of its performance-based payments are reserved for indigenous peoples and local communities, whose daily stewardship plays an outside role in keeping forests intact.

This allocation is not symbolic. According to the Rainforest Foundation US, indigenous and local communities were deeply involved in co-designing the facility. Across months of global consultations, more than 400 community leaders shared their perspectives. The model offers something new: not only financial support but also formal decision-making power. Yet, important gaps remain. For instance, indigenous representatives do not have voting rights on the main governing bodies of the Fund, raising questions about how genuinely inclusive decision-making will be.

Even as the TFFF proposes this inclusive architecture, many civil society groups have



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The real test is whether it will protect the communities protecting the forest

voiced their strong criticism. The Global Forest Coalition (GFC) described the fund as “colonialistic”, arguing that it benefits intermediaries rather than forest peoples. Its worry was about a mechanism built around market logic and financial returns that may not address the root structural causes of deforestation, such as agribusiness expansion, oil and mining projects, and large infrastructure, all of which continue to drive forest loss. According to the GFC, rewarding standing forests without curbing exploitative activities risks creating a superficial conservation narrative.

Compounding this, some critics argue that the payment rate, around \$4 a hectare in earlier proposals, is inadequate given the manifold ecosystem services that forests provide. There is a risk that national governments could absorb most of the funds, while communities on the ground may see little benefit. The success of the TFFF, therefore, depends not just on its size but on strong delivery mechanisms and rigorous, locally accountable institutions.

Conservation overlooks power imbalances

Amid these debates, Brazil has taken steps to buttress access. On the sidelines of COP30, it announced a dedicated digital platform to help forest countries navigate TFFF eligibility. The platform, developed with partners such as the UNDP, FAO, WWF and the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (GATC), promises technical assistance, capacity building and peer collaboration. It is stated that independence from the TFFF's governing structures is meant to prevent conflict of interest while focusing on inclusion and knowledge sharing.

This structure matters because forest conservation has long overlooked deep power imbalances. For many indigenous groups, protecting the Amazon is not just an environmental fight but also a struggle for survival. This was clear at COP30, where indigenous protesters entered the venue

demanding territorial rights, insisting that their land cannot be treated as a commodity. Many felt excluded from decisions that directly affect their homes.

Land rights remain central to this debate. Ahead of COP30, the Forest and Climate Leaders' Partnership (FCLP) renewed its Forest and Land Tenure Pledge, committing \$1.8 billion from 2026 to 2030 to support indigenous, local and Afro-descendant communities. The pledge was a key part of the Belém agenda, reflecting scientific warnings that the Amazon's future remains at risk without secure land rights.

Civil society groups also stressed that climate justice and nature protection cannot be separated. Conservation International called COP30 a chance to secure long-term funding for the Amazon, supporting forest protection, community governance and sustainable livelihoods. They warned that sidelining indigenous leadership weakens both climate action and human rights.

Yet, financing alone cannot counter pressures from infrastructure, agribusiness and extractive industries. The protests in Belém showed that money means little without real shifts in power. Without strong accountability, funds risk flowing to intermediaries while local communities continue to face land loss and displacement.

Beyond the money

The TFFF's launch in Belém is a major step, but its credibility depends on whether it actually transfers power to forest communities rather than reinforcing old hierarchies. For indigenous peoples, forests are home and survival. The real challenge is in ensuring that finance reaches them in forms they control, turning promises into lasting protection. A future of genuine conservation will depend on whether global finance strengthens community rights instead of replicating old patterns of exclusion.

The views expressed are personal