State of Global Environmental Governance 2025

International Institute for Sustainable Development

Earth Negotiations Bulletin

IISD
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Edited by
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Contributing authors:
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Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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State of Global Environmental Governance 2025

February 2026

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Foreword

Rolph Payet, Executive Secretary, Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions speaks at the 6th Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific in August 2025 (Kiara Worth/ENB)

As I look back on 2025, I am excited by the ongoing commitment of governments to engage multilaterally to address our most pressing global environmental issues—pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss. Despite other geopolitical challenges evolving as we speak, the profound sense of purpose and solidarity that has defined our collective work under the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions remain strong and resolute.

This was evident during the 2025 meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions, which saw the participation of over 2,000 negotiators from 182 parties joining us under the theme "Make Visible the Invisible." A total of 56 decisions of global significance were taken through consensus, including the listing of new chemicals under the Stockholm and Rotterdam Conventions, as well as amendments to the Basel Convention aimed at further strengthening global safeguards against hazardous chemicals and wastes.

However, behind these achievements lay real challenges with additional complexities, capacity constraints, access to financing to implement commitments, and, in many cases, grappling with balancing economic growth and job creation against the demands of health and environmental considerations. Whilst such negotiations are often long and intense, I am always in awe at the determination of parties to find solutions that meet their needs, move from divergent positions to common understanding, and at the same time not short-circuit their collective ambition. There is indeed growing appreciation that multilateral environmental agreements do not operate in isolation from reality, nor are they just archives of resolutions and reports, but have the profound ability to bring states together to commit to joint action. Indeed, the UN80 reforms, which are ongoing, are pushing us beyond polishing the spotlight toward lighting the way. Furthermore, our role is to broker solutions, not get lost in endless meetings and plans that never see the light of day. Indeed, having our Conferences of the Parties every 2 years is advantageous as it allows us to implement those important decisions.

Critical to making a difference on the world stage are partnership and cooperation, that is, between countries, international, regional and local organizations, civil society, academia, as well as the private sector. Within the chemicals and waste cluster, cooperation with the private sector is indispensable as it holds both the solutions and resources to drive this change. Our cooperation with other global agreements, such as the Montreal Protocol

on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, has shown that strengthening national customs organizations concomitantly addresses illegal traffic and dumping of ozone-depleting equipment and the illegal wildlife trade, as well as illegal trade in chemicals and wastes. Our global PCB elimination initiative has also shown how we need to work with the energy sector, public utilities, and development banks as we near the global phase-out of the chemical by 2028.

Underpinning such important work are the scientific processes as well as global monitoring programs. This became evident during the intergovernmental negotiating process to develop an international, legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment. Whilst there were many challenges with the negotiations in 2025, it became clear that the most problematic areas were about the life cycle of plastics and chemicals in plastics, both of which are technically demanding and require appropriate time for negotiations. Whilst ambitions and tensions remain high, I am confident we will land with a plastics pollution instrument that addresses in a significant manner the global threat of plastic pollution.

Following the successful negotiations for the Global Framework on Chemicals, we also managed to conclude negotiations for the establishment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution, not to rival existing panels, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, but to complement their excellent groundbreaking work in ensuring we have robust science for decision making. I believe the new panel will incentivize more research into greener and more sustainable chemicals and products, as well as stimulate innovation in that important sector.

The environment and the economy are inseparable, and history has repeatedly shown that neglecting one in favour of the other can have severe consequences for livelihoods and public health. This is why sustainability—and the Sustainable Development Goals—must remain at the forefront of our priorities when negotiating multilaterally. Fishermen who once resisted the establishment of marine protected areas eventually came to recognize that these zones are essential for the long-term viability of their fisheries. The same lesson applies to industrial development pursued without adequate environmental safeguards: in the 1970s, Europe's skies were choked by acid rain, and today many cities across the global South face dangerous levels of air pollution that threaten not only schoolchildren and the elderly, but productive workers.

Overall, the year was both productive and impactful, while also exposing important fissures—as well as opportunities—within the global environmental multilateral framework. These insights underscore the need to reinforce existing mechanisms even as we pursue new avenues of commitment, cooperation, and financing that bring these conventions into the daily lives of people everywhere. By advancing sustainable jobs, green chemicals, circular approaches to resources and wastes, as well as ensuring access to healthy food, clean water, and secure livelihoods, we can continue to work toward safeguarding our planet as we translate global commitments into tangible benefits for every citizen of planet Earth.

Rolph Payet

Executive Secretary, Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions

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← Princess Abze Djigma, Burkina Faso, celebrating the adoption of the decision on the just transition work programme at the closing plenary of UNFCCC COP 30 in Belém, Brazil. (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

Letter from the Editor

In 2025, the United Nations (UN) turned 80. For eight decades, it has been at the heart of the modern multilateral system, fostering cooperation among member states to solve complex global challenges. Yet, longevity is no covenant of certainty. Continuing a decline from recent years, 2025 saw trust in multilateralism wane.

The UN was set up in the wake of the Second World War. Back then, global power and wealth were concentrated in a handful of countries. Over the years, as empires broke apart, the UN grew from its 51 original members to 193. The world shifted from the bipolar system of the Cold War era to one where middle-income countries exercise significantly more influence. In 2025, geopolitical plates continued their persistent movement, with the United States all but relinquishing its leadership role—and others eager to fill the void. The "triple political crisis" of mistrust, misinformation, and populism further fuelled division.

The structures set up decades ago were increasingly seen as ill-equipped to respond to developing countries' needs. The global financial system was often cited as a source of particular concern.

Developing countries face higher borrowing costs. Public debt is on the rise. Debt servicing costs prohibit adequate spending on education, health, and the environment. On top of these challenges, the global annual Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) financing gap is USD 4 trillion. Foreign aid is shrinking, with the United States, Canada, and major European donors such as France, Germany, Finland, and Sweden slashing development assistance. Add to this declining investment, dwindling government spending, and escalating trade tensions, and the tensions in the post-war global financial architecture couldn't be clearer.

The Pact for the Future—and the UN80 Initiative launched in March—set out to respond to the crisis facing multilateralism. These plans are, respectively, the "what" and the "how" of rethinking how the global community can deliver on its commitments without leaving anyone behind. Implementation is underway on both these fronts. And while the need for reform, or "strategic renewal," is clear, most countries remain largely committed to multilateralism to address global issues, particularly on the environment. At the *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* (ENB), we too are staunch supporters of multilateralism. And we can be stubborn about it.

Despite the serious challenges facing people and the planet, global environmental governance delivered some advances in 2025's difficult political climate. In a spirit of "constructive hope" that allows us to analyze challenges and identify paths forward, let us reflect on some of 2025's takeaways.

Thanks to the Montreal Protocol, the ozone layer is healing. Under the Paris Agreement, the proportion of global emissions covered by net-zero pledges by mid-century has increased from zero in 2015 to about 70% today. Even though there was no agreement in Belém on fossil fuel phase-out, a reported 80+ governments backed developing a roadmap on the final day of the conference. This level of support gives us a reason for hope in 2026.

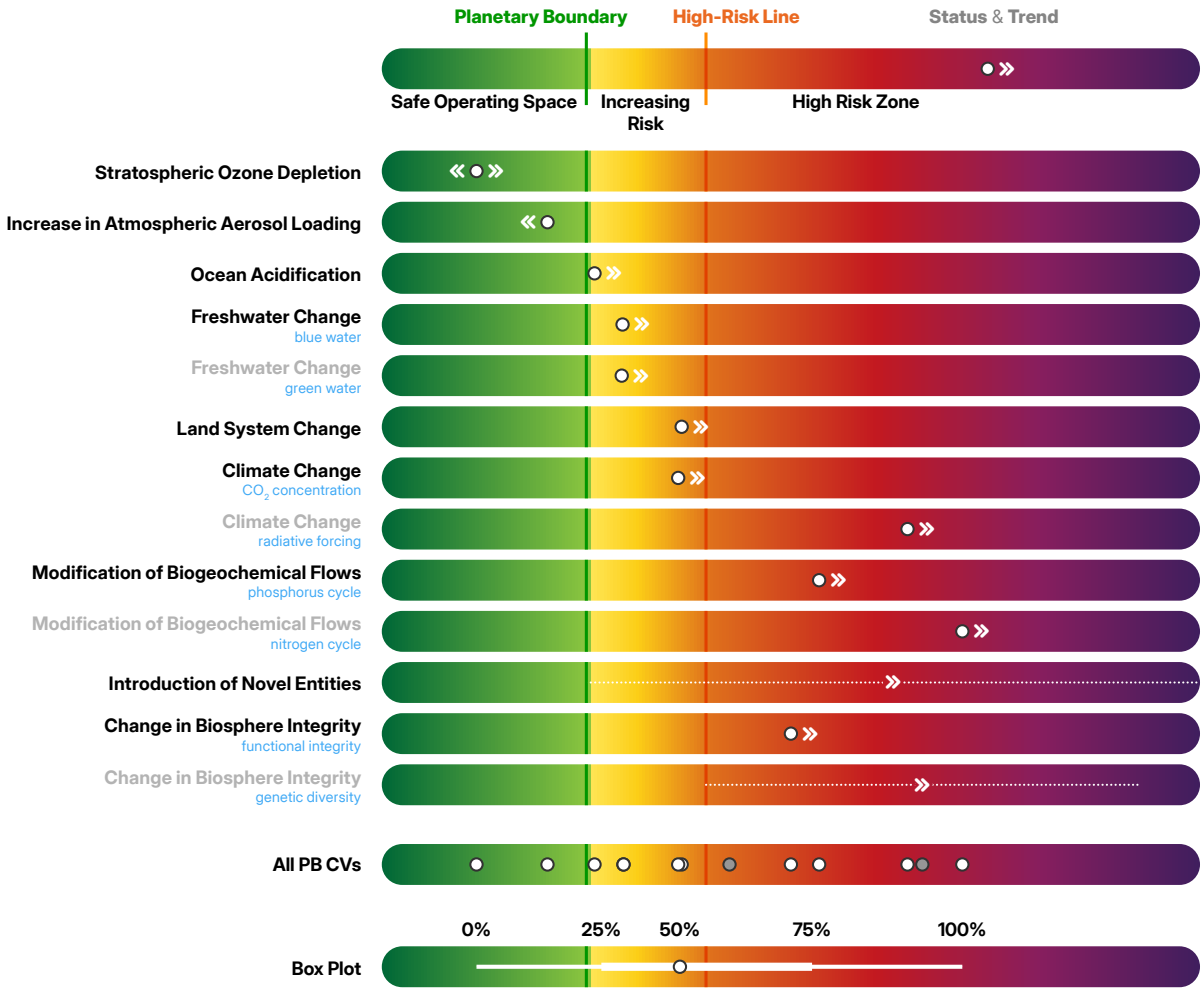
In the first half of 2025, for the first time on record, renewables overtook coal in the global electricity mix. Renewable energy now accounts for one-third of global power generation. And while climate change remains the main driver of the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, data show most of the increase in natural disasters is due to improved reporting. Better data lead to better disaster preparedness. Evidence shows that climate governance frameworks, policies, and legislation have improved significantly. Despite a significant emissions gap, today, the international community is far better positioned than a decade ago to accelerate climate ambition and action.

While 77 new species came under Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) protection in 2025, thanks to conservation successes, several species, including the Kazakhstan population of saiga antelope and South Africa's bontebok, no longer need the rigour of protection they once demanded. A dedicated body is working on Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Peoples and local communities' contributions to biodiversity stewardship. And while we do not yet have a plastics treaty, a new panel is ready to begin strengthening the science-policy interface to better address chemicals, waste, and pollution. We round out a look at the successes and struggles of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in Chapter 2.

However, geopolitical tensions loom large as we explore in Chapter 1. Good-faith engagement, common ground, and compromise are increasingly elusive. The rules-based global order seems to be cracking at the seams. According to Planetary Health Check 2025, seven out of nine Planetary Boundaries have been breached. This indicates whatever progress is being made, it is much too slow.

Amid these challenges, how can we leverage successes and accelerate much-needed progress? As we explain in Chapter 3, there are lessons to be learned. Synergies across MEAs can be identified and used creatively through integrated approaches. Robust accountability mechanisms add credence to nationally driven efforts. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches provide frameworks for transformative change. International courts and tribunals

Figure 1. Planetary health at a glance



Source: Caesar & Sakschewski et al., 2025.

repaint the blurry governance landscape by distinguishing legal obligations from policy choices. Innovations ranging from initiatives to alleviate the debt burden to novel tools to mobilize investment (think climate impact bonds!) take us closer to more equitable governance systems.

We're less than 5 years from the deadline for the SDGs and are entering a critical year for climate and biodiversity action. Formal negotiations on what a future sustainable development agenda might look like are due to start at the SDG Summit in 2027.

In 2025, initial discussions on the future of sustainable development got underway in many halls. As these conversations evolve (we preview 2026 in Chapter 4), we continue to stubbornly hope that 2026 sees integrated approaches expand, synergies take hold, and cooperation revive.


UNITED STATES

← The seat for the US sits empty after American diplomats exit talks for global tax cooperation—emblematic of a wider US withdrawal from multilateral negotiations in 2025. (Matt TenBruggencate/ENB)

Chapter 1.

Geopolitics

In 2025, global political and economic fragmentation put the rules-based system under enormous pressure. The number of major international conflicts grew to 59, the highest since World War II. The 2025 Global Peace Index indicates a growing number of countries are ramping up their militaries, amid increasing economic uncertainty and eroding longstanding alliances. Trade is more volatile than ever. In 2025, tariffs became a threat as much as a policy tool, most notably coming from the United States. Governments' trust in multilateralism is at its all-time low. More than before, in 2025, negotiations across environmental and sustainable development issues reflected geopolitical changes and tensions.

Most of the treaties we follow at ENB were negotiated after the Cold War ended. At that time, there was a sense of possibility for global cooperation on a range of issues, especially the environment. A wave of summits was held on non-security issues, from human rights to food. Building on the legacy of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Earth Summit) laid the foundation for global approaches to environmental issues. It set out key principles in Agenda 21 and launched treaties on climate change, desertification, and biodiversity: the Rio Conventions. Agreements on other critical issues followed, including on several sources of pollution, along with protocols and other instruments designed to advance global cooperation to safeguard human health and the environment.

Progress has never been easy, but 2025 brought intense geopolitical headwinds, complicating environmental negotiations and slowing progress toward consensus in many multilateral forums. Throughout the year, in the face of growing geopolitical tensions, advocates for multilateralism underscored the importance of global cooperation. In February, when countries finalized the work of the 2024 UN Biodiversity Conference, they declared "the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) is a public policy with the power to unite the world, especially in the current divided geopolitical landscape." Closing the UN Environment Assembly in December, UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Executive Director Inger Andersen said countries lit "the beacon of environmental multilateralism that rises above the fog of geopolitical complexity and differences."

However, that beacon seemed dim on several "big stages" where countries gathered to discuss high-profile environmental crises, such as climate change. Deliberations across a range of international bodies reflected growing divisions on issues large and small. Consensus seemed to move further out of reach. In some cases, views

held by a small number of countries found new support, reinforcing the entrenched positions that prevented movement toward common ground. These trends contributed to another year without a plastics treaty and an inability to adopt a roadmap for phasing out fossil fuels at the Belém Climate Change Conference.

2025 also saw a shift in how some countries chose to engage in environmental multilateralism. For example, the United States did not send an official delegation to the Belém climate conference. The U.S. absence was also felt at the 2025 meetings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the intergovernmental negotiations of the new instrument on international tax cooperation, and the adoption of the pandemic agreement at the World Health Organization. Its formal rejection of the SDGs prompted others, like Argentina and Costa Rica, to follow suit.

While the United States is a party to a limited number of major multilateral environmental treaties, it is a global power with considerable influence. As we saw at the spring meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm (BRS) conventions, where the United States is an observer, the country continued to play a significant role in shaping deliberations (including, for example, the decision on the industrial chemical UV-328, which is used as a light stabilizer in plastics).

Others may have looked to fill the void left by the United States's withdrawal. In September, China's President Xi Jinping proposed a global initiative for countries to work together toward a more just and equitable global governance system. The world's largest emitter by a significant margin in terms of aggregate emissions, the country submitted its much-anticipated revised climate plan ahead of the Belém conference. It is also one of the few countries that can demonstrate meeting its nationally determined contribution (NDC), as China's emissions seem to have peaked in 2025, with the caveat that its NDC targets do not align with 1.5°C.

Casualties of 2025's Geopolitics

Geopolitical tensions caused blockages across issues and forums, including in scientific bodies that provide important information for policy-making. The United States, Saudi Arabia, the Russian Federation, and Iran blocked the adoption of the Summary for Policymakers (SPM) of the *Global Environmental Outlook 7 (GEO-7)*. While an executive summary of the report is available, the SPM would have provided a multilaterally agreed and more technical and detailed summation of the main report, highlighting key messages and findings of relevance to policy-makers. The lack of an

Working Group (WG) I Co-Chairs confer with WG I Vice-Chairs and Technical Support Unit staff members at the 62nd Session of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (Anastasia Rodopoulou/ENB)

SPM will make it more difficult for policy-makers to translate the science contained in GEO-7 into action.

The scientific advisory bodies that support the work of the Stockholm and Rotterdam Conventions will not have members from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region because the Russian Federation and Belarus blocked the experts put forward by the other members of the region. These committees gather information about how chemicals are produced, used, managed, or traded. The lack of representation of the CEE region could translate to limited or missing data in upcoming reports and recommendations.

In many negotiating rooms, the diplomatic norms that underpin consensus building seemed strained. We heard delegates across processes wonder if their counterparts were "negotiating in good faith"; that is, actually trying to find compromises to achieve common goals. Stalling tactics seemed to be more common in 2025. Points of order arose more often than in previous years. In some cases, such as in multiple sessions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, delegates spent extensive time debating routine administrative matters. In other processes, voting was called for time and again, on both procedural and substantive issues. The Russian Federation and its allies frequently requested that these votes take place by secret ballot, which can take more than twice as long to complete. Some exchanges stripped the veneer of civility conveyed by diplomatic language. For example, after another long night of talks at the Belém climate conference, a delegate from the Russian Federation admonished Latin American negotiators against "behaving like children who want to get their hands on all the sweets."

Blocking consensus wasn't just about stalling or using undiplomatic language in 2025. Tariffs emerged as a foreign policy tool, not just for trade or security, but also to

advance state priorities in environmental governance. The United States threatened tariffs against countries that accepted shipping regulations on emissions that were carefully negotiated at the International Maritime Organization. The draft agreement aims to reach net-zero in the sector by 2050 by coupling mandatory fuel standards with carbon pricing mechanisms. Saudi Arabia requested a vote to postpone the discussions for a year. It narrowly passed, in part because of the U.S. threat. After the Belém conference, there is also dedicated space in the climate negotiations to discuss unilateral trade-restrictive measures, such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.

Socially conservative shifts in several countries' domestic politics contributed to challenges to action on critical issues of justice and equity. In many forums, countries debated the concept of gender, with some opposing the use of the term. Adoption of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution (ISP-CWP) almost derailed when the United States and Argentina opposed language related to gender, instead insisting on references to men and women. A vote was required to adopt the gender action plan at the CITES meeting. Twenty-two countries voted against the plan, including the United States, the Russian Federation, Iran, and Indonesia. Climate negotiators at the 30th UN Climate Change Conference (COP 30) overcame strong opposition to adopt a Gender Action Plan, which is designed to ensure climate policy-making systematically considers the impacts on women and girls.

2025 was a difficult year for Indigenous Peoples striving to have their issues recognized in global environmental decision making. A few countries sought to replace or equate Indigenous Peoples with local communities, whether discussing the ISP-CWP's approach, the Plant Genetic Treaty, the Minamata Convention on Mercury, or, counterintuitively, at the first meeting of the subsidiary body on Article 8(j), which focuses on the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD's) provisions related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Terminology matters. Indigenous Peoples have rights under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including the right to self-determination. These rights risk erasure if Indigenous Peoples are likened to local communities.

A Liquidity Crisis at the UN

The financial position of the UN was severely compromised in 2025, as several core donors—including the United States—did not deliver their monetary commitments. Secretary-General António Guterres repeatedly warned that the UN was facing a liquidity crisis and would be on a path to

bankruptcy if member states did not pay their dues in full; however, his warnings did not spur all countries to act. At the end of the third quarter of 2025, the UN was still owed nearly USD 1.6 billion in mandatory contributions. In November, UNEP alone projected a year-end shortfall of USD 15.7 million. The funding gap had wide-ranging implications. Negotiators had to leave UN premises earlier than usual each night. Side event organizers had to pay for space. Many UN staff supporting negotiations and countries lost their jobs.

Intertwined with the UN's funding shortfall is the Secretary-General's plan to streamline the UN through a massive, system-wide reform effort dubbed UN80. While UN80 coincides with the funding crisis, it is not a direct response. Rather, it aims to address the long-term sustainability of the UN by making the organization "more agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges amid tightening resources." These challenges include multilateralism in crisis.

The impact of this initiative, in combination with the funding deficit, has been strongly felt across the organization, including in UNEP. In September, UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen outlined the impacts in stark terms, explaining the Programme could save approximately USD 11 million by taking "prudency measures" such as freezing posts, cutting expenditures, and increasing efficiency. The remaining gap would have to be addressed by cutting approximately 170 posts by the end of the year. These posts matter. UNEP staff provide technical assistance, capacity building, and expertise to help ensure global negotiations run fairly and smoothly.

As difficult as 2025 has been, the funding crisis will likely deepen in 2026 and 2027. Voluntary contributions make up nearly 95% of UNEP's budget, and many core donor countries are cutting funding for foreign aid programs and redirecting resources to defence spending. For example, NATO members' defence budgets are set to increase to 5% of GDP annually by 2035 following intense pressure from the United States. The UN's biggest funder, the United States, is likely to continue withholding or providing drastically reduced contributions. In December, the U.S. State Department pledged USD 2 billion to support specific humanitarian work under the UN, but also warned the organization to "adapt, shrink, or die."

Achieving the goals of the UN80 Initiative will be key to growing the organization's ability to respond effectively to increasingly complex global crises. Amid several major powers actively challenging the rules-based system of global cooperation, it will be imperative for other member states to step up to prevent its collapse.

← Susana Muhamad gavels the resumed session of the 2024 UN Biodiversity Conference to a close. (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

Chapter 2.

The Year at a Glance

In 2025, we heard more stakeholders asking if the UN is up to the challenges facing the environment. Global financing shortfalls, deepening budget cuts, and waning trust between governments made calls for reform increasingly urgent: reform of global governance, reform of the international financial architecture, and reform of the UN itself. Like any 80-year-old machine, it needs to be cared for, repaired when broken, and upgraded whenever possible.

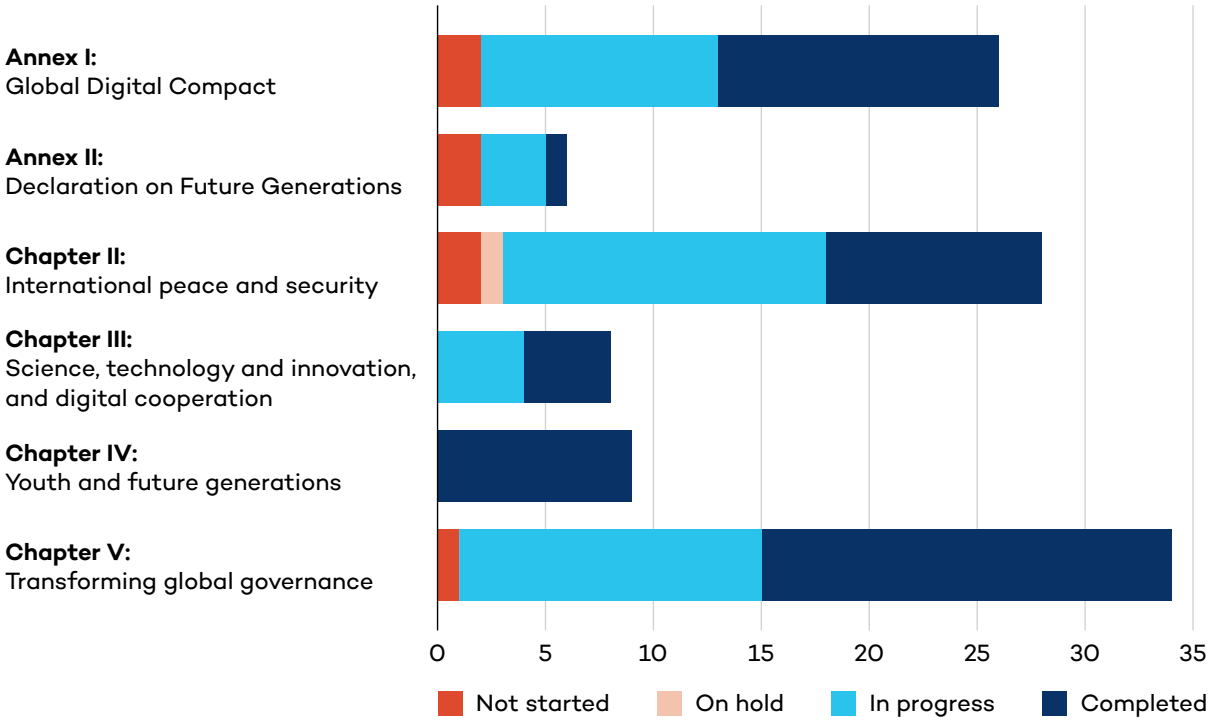
Advancing the Pact for the Future

Much of this work falls under the purview of the Pact for the Future. With its two annexes, it spells out a total of 363 actions for governments and the UN to deliver a more inclusive, secure, and sustainable future. In 2025, we saw implementation cogs begin to turn. To support this member state-driven process, the UN initiated or completed almost all of its action points, including:

- convening the First Biennial Summit for a Sustainable, Inclusive and Resilient Global Economy in September, which contributed to reform of the international financial architecture—a major component of transforming global governance. This event aimed to strengthen links and coordination between the UN and international financial institutions.
- appointing an independent High-Level Expert Group to develop recommendations for indicators of sustainable development that complement or go beyond GDP. These indicators are meant to capture what societies truly value, including environmental health, social equity, and long-term resilience.
- transitioning the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Technology to a new UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (in addition, member states established an independent international scientific panel to assess how AI is transforming our lives and launched a global dialogue to hear from governments and stakeholders on critical AI-related issues).
- drafting terms of reference and budget proposals for the Special Envoy for Future Generations, for member states' consideration pending other decisions in the context of UN80.

Now, member states have the supports they need to advance the actions they agreed to.

Figure 2. UN progress on the Pact for the Future and its annexes



Source: United Nations.

Leveraging Science for Policy

In 2025, keeping science at the heart of environmental governance came with challenges.

Countries established a dedicated science body to inform policy-making on chemicals, waste, and pollution. The new ISP-CWP joins the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services to complete a "trifecta" of science-policy bodies to inform responses to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

2025 saw the oldest science-policy panel struggling, both procedurally and substantively. While IPCC delegates achieved consensus on the outlines of a number of outputs for the seventh assessment cycle, the two IPCC meetings in 2025 revealed entrenched differences on the timeline for their delivery. While many countries sought to align delivery of the IPCC's outputs with the global stocktake under the Paris Agreement, a small but growing minority of countries insisted on a longer cycle for the production of the seventh assessment report. These countries frequently cited pressures on developing country scientists, although others insisted that a longer timeline can actually depress participation of people from resource-stretched countries or with caring responsibilities.

Discussions on science became more contentious in the climate negotiations. Attempts to acknowledge the IPCC as the source of best available science were opposed by several delegations in Belém. Others

expressed dismay at the lack of a reference in the COP 30 outcome to the phase-out of fossil fuels, pointing to science describing them as the main driver of climate change. In the closing plenary, Colombia emphasized that the "COP of truth cannot support an outcome that ignores science."

Both the biodiversity and desertification processes revealed tensions around the role of science in informing policy. A CBD delegate captured the sentiment we saw across negotiations in 2025: "[S]cience seems to be most valued when it does not dictate the work of the Convention or clash with national interests." In the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), work to get the Intergovernmental Working Group for a Future Scientific Framework up and running was delayed by objections from the Russian Federation, following the exclusion of its scientific expert "for political reasons."

Driving Ambition in Tackling the Triple Planetary Crisis

Despite the strong preferences of a reported group of some 80 countries, the outcome of the Belém climate conference did not include references to fossil fuel phase-out or to halting and reversing deforestation. There were also concerns about the integrity of modifications negotiated in Belém to the decision on indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation. While the global community now has a set of approximately 60 indicators to refine and incorporate into their adaptation planning, last-minute changes compromised their credibility, making them more difficult to operationalize.

On a brighter note, the decision to develop a just transition mechanism provides an institutional "home" for discussions on labour rights, the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and access to affordable energy and low-carbon technologies on the path to net-zero.

The third round of climate pledges fell short of expectations. Most countries were late to submit their NDCs, and as of December 31, 2025, they covered only around 75% of global emissions. The deadline was February 2025. These commitments are not nearly ambitious enough to keep the world from crossing the 1.5°C threshold.

However, there were early signs of promise in the Paris Agreement's enhanced transparency framework (national reports about what parties are already doing). Together, the 100+ Biennial Transparency Reports and national inventory reports provided evidence of sounder policies, new institutions, and whole-of-society approaches driving change to achieve global climate objectives. As United Nations Framework

Marina Silva, Minister of the Environment and Climate Change, Brazil, at the closing plenary of UNFCCC COP 30 in Belém, Brazil. (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Executive Secretary Simon Stiell noted, these reports serve as "a vital enabling tool to build [a] stronger evidence base for more ambitious policies, drive greater investment and more resilient economies." Encouragingly, national adaptation shifted from planning to responses. Progress must urgently accelerate to close the remaining emissions and adaptation gaps.

In 2025, the leaders of several island nations, including Prime Minister of Barbados Mia Mottley, called for a binding agreement on methane, moving beyond the current voluntary 2021 Global Methane Pledge. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas. Eliminating methane emissions, particularly from the oil and gas sector, could avoid nearly 0.3°C of warming by the 2040s. Together with a tripling of renewables and doubling of energy efficiency—as countries agreed to achieve at the 2023 UAE climate conference—implementation of the methane commitments could slow global warming by one-third in 10 years and halve it by 2040.

Despite high expectations and years of hard work, no plastics treaty emerged from that intergovernmental negotiating committee in 2025. Intractable positions dominated, ranging from the scope of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) mandate for the negotiations (whether to negotiate a treaty for the full life cycle of plastics or focus on plastic waste) to

who would be responsible for financing implementation. The United States changed its position in 2025, opposing mentions of plastic production. This reversal drew substantial criticism. It also added a powerful voice to the Like-Minded Coalition, a group of oil-producing states blocking caps on production. Additional concerns over process and transparency eventually led to the chair stepping down. More efforts, although it's unclear what type, will be needed to "get it right next time."

Chemicals work in other forums, including the 2025 BRS COPs, proceeded more smoothly. Parties to the Basel Convention—the first multilateral agreement to act on plastic waste by making certain plastic wastes subject to the prior informed consent procedure—heard calls to ensure coherence between the plastics amendment to the Convention and the anticipated plastic treaty. The Stockholm Convention's COP agreed to list three new persistent organic pollutants as harmful "forever chemicals," found in industrial applications, everyday household items, and now apparently also in dolphins and whales. Curiously, the Rotterdam Convention's COP could not agree to list one of these chemicals—chlorpyrifos—to share information about it during trade.

2025's major developments on the Ocean speak to the need to balance protection of marine biodiversity against the world's quest to transition to green energy. On the one hand, with the entry into force of the World Trade Organization fisheries deal and the Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ), we now have complementary frameworks for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction—a major win for the Ocean. On the other hand, negotiations in the International Seabed Authority Council on the draft regulations for the commercial exploitation of deep-sea minerals have yet to deliver guidelines on deep-sea mining.

Some 40 countries have expressed support for a moratorium or precautionary pause on mining activities, citing the need to study and protect deep-sea ecosystems. Others wish to initiate commercial exploitation as soon as possible, to mine for nickel, manganese, cobalt, and copper, among other minerals used in renewable energy technologies. In the absence of agreed rules, in March, The Metals Company USA LLC formally initiated a process with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under the U.S. Department of Commerce to apply for exploration licences and commercial recovery permits under existing U.S. legislation. Shortly after, the U.S. White House announced it would expedite the review and approval of such licences. Of course, the United States is not party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the framework for

these talks. But these actions put pressure on the negotiations to deliver a robust set of regulations—and fast.

On biodiversity, we now have a GBF monitoring framework and agreement on resource mobilization. Together with a roadmap toward permanent institutional arrangements for the CBD financial mechanism, these are expected to advance the GBF's implementation. The CBD's new dedicated permanent body on Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous Peoples and local communities' contributions to biodiversity stewardship embarked on its work. Countries agreed to recommend several decisions for adoption, except the body's *modus operandi*. The key sticking point was how to balance the participation and decision-making powers between countries and Indigenous Peoples and local communities. If only countries have a say about Indigenous issues, it could undermine rights to self-determination. It could also weaken the outcomes of the body. Still, many underscored the body's very establishment as "not merely symbolic but pav[ing] the way for inclusive environmental governance."

CITES celebrated its 50th anniversary. Picking up a workload nothing short of monumental, delegates discussed 114 agenda items, adopted 353 decisions, took part in 46 rounds of voting, reviewed 50 listing proposals, and brought 77 new species under CITES protection. This points to biodiversity in crisis. But the meeting was also a testament to hard work paying off. Thanks to successful conservation efforts, protections for several species were relaxed. For example, trade was reopened (under strictly limited circumstances) for the Kazakhstan population of saiga antelope, which rebounded from 21,000 individuals in 2003 to nearly 4 million in 2025.

Less encouraging was the outcome of 12 years of negotiations to improve benefit-sharing under the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), where positions remained intractable. Delegates were unable to reach agreement on how to share monetary and non-monetary benefits between users of plant genetic resources (usually in developed countries) and developing country providers and their farmers. The process will continue work on improved implementation of the multilateral system of access and benefit-sharing as it currently stands. Increasing legal certainty and enhancing fairness and equity in "an increasingly unfair and inequitable global system" remain a challenge for the treaty.

Building on Rio's Legacy

Several of 2025's developments trace their origins to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. In Rio de Janeiro, countries committed to accelerating social and economic

development, promoting environmental protection, and strengthening means of implementation.

The Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) built on the previous FfD conferences and the commitments in the Pact for the Future. A new global roadmap aims to raise trillions of dollars every year to bridge the annual SDG financing gap, currently at USD 4 trillion. Complementing this renewed framework is the Sevilla Platform for Action, featuring more than 130 initiatives already underway "to turn the pledges into real-world results." In addition, countries and partners launched initiatives to tackle debt burdens, mobilize investment, and support financial architecture reform at national and global levels.

Thirty years after the first World Summit for Social Development in 1995, the second World Social Summit gave a boost to the 2030 Agenda. World leaders recommitted to addressing poverty, unemployment, and exclusion. They also recognized new challenges for social development, such as digital transformation, misinformation and disinformation, and demographic shifts. The event also "provided a launching pad for discussions on how to incorporate social development issues into the post-2030 Agenda." A follow-up process was agreed to monitor the implementation of these commitments.

Navigating the Law and Policy Nexus

Another important signal in 2025 came from the International Court of Justice, which made clear that a country's withdrawal from environmental treaties does not cancel out its existing legal obligations. In its 2025 Advisory Opinion, the court clarified states' obligations with respect to climate change and what happens if these are breached.

From the Court's findings, it follows that mitigation and adaptation action is not a policy choice for a government to make but a state's legal duty. The U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement does not free it from its climate change-related obligations under other treaties, customary law, human rights law, and general principles of international law. The United States also remains bound by the laws of state responsibility, which are recognized as a reflection of international custom. Failure to meet its obligations leads to international responsibility, including a duty to cease wrongful behaviour and to make full reparation for its consequences.

Table 1. The year in review

Issue area	Process	Delivered?
Sustainable development	Summit of the Future	✓ Implementation of the Pact for the Future and its annexes underway
	Second Summit for Social Development	✓ Governments recommit to building a more just, inclusive, equitable, and sustainable world
		✓ Governments recognize new challenges for social development, including digital transformation, misinformation and disinformation, and demographic shifts
	FfD4	✓ Global FfD roadmap, Sevilla Platform for Action
Climate change	UNFCCC	− Third NDCs: as of December 31, 2025, 122 are in, accounting for 75% of global emissions, ambition insufficient for 1.5°C
		✓ Decision to develop a just transition mechanism
		✓ New Gender Action Plan
		✓ Global Goal on Adaptation indicators adopted
		✗ No decision on fossil fuel phase-out
		✗ No decision on halting and reversing deforestation
		✗ No discussion of Roadmap to USD 1.3 trillion
	ICJ	✓ Advisory opinion on states' climate obligations and consequences of their breach
Biodiversity	CBD	✓ Decisions on GBF implementation monitoring, resource mobilization, financial mechanism
		✓ SB8j begins work
	ITPGRFA	✗ No agreement to enhance the ITPGRFA multilateral system of access and benefit-sharing
	UNCLOS	✓ BBNJ Agreement reaches 60 ratifications needed for entry into force
		− Slow progress in negotiations toward deep-sea mining regulations

Issue area	Process	Delivered?
Chemicals and waste	Negotiations toward a science-policy panel	✅ SPP Established
	Negotiations toward a plastic treaty	❌ To continue in 2026

Source: Authors' observations, ENB Reports.

A cat approaches delegates at the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025. (Anastasia Rodopoulou/ENB)

Chapter 3.

Increasing Governance Efficiency Through Synergies and Accountability

As MEAs mature and the field of international treaties becomes more crowded, 2025 revealed an increasing emphasis on efficiency in implementation and governance. Efficiency took on renewed salience because of shrinking budgets and the need "to do more with less." Also feeding these discussions was growing recognition of the importance of a systems approach to sustainable development policy. This approach has accelerated under the 2030 Agenda, which recognizes that sustainable development action must break through silos.

Synergies support coherence and efficiency across agreements. Transparency and accountability mechanisms promote implementation within MEAs. The coming into its own of the Paris Agreement's enhanced transparency framework in 2025 offers a case study in governance structures to achieve MEA accountability and, eventually, impact.

BRS Leads the Way

The BRS conventions have long pioneered the synergies approach. The synergies process of these conventions, which have held back-to-back COPs since 2013, offers a model for administrative and operational coordination and efficiency while maintaining the legal autonomy of the three MEAs. It is recognized for bringing efficiencies in budgeting and technical support.

In 2025, the BRS Conventions held their biannual COPs jointly and back to back. Decisions adopted in 2025 by two or all three of the COPs illustrated the benefits of the BRS synergies process. A proposed new gender action plan was considered jointly, rather than requiring each COP to conduct repetitive negotiations. A decision on "Synergies in preventing and combating illegal traffic and trade in hazardous chemicals and wastes" sought to strengthen ways the three conventions have worked together to support parties to identify and address the illegal movements of such chemicals. Given that enforcement officers at the national level for the three conventions are often the same individuals, combined training programs on the obligations under the three conventions offer another good example of the value of an implementation process focused on synergies.

In 2025, the BRS Conventions were drawn more deeply into the web of overlapping treaties governing chemicals and wastes. For example, the entry into force on June 26, 2025, of the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships

← The Brazilian Presidency and UNFCCC Secretariat consult at the closing plenary of UNFCCC COP 30 in Belém, Brazil. (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

created challenges for the Basel Convention as "each Convention independently tries to provide legal clarity on how to navigate the clearly overlapping mandates." The BRS COPs recognized that similar challenges would manifest when, or if, the new plastics treaty becomes a reality. The COPs called to ensure the plastics treaty "is fully coherent with and complementary to the BRS conventions and avoids duplication." Parties were also encouraged "to engage in the Bern process and actively promote cooperation and policy coherence among multilateral environmental agreements at the national level … through, as appropriate, a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach."

Rio Conventions Explore Options

The ecosystem of biodiversity-related treaties is equally dense. Like BRS, there is a long-running cooperation mechanism called the Bern Process. The Bern Process provides a platform for dialogue, coordination, and collaboration for biodiversity objectives among biodiversity-related conventions and a broader group of MEAs. Its Bern I (2019) and Bern II (2021) meetings brought together representatives of multiple conventions to align on cross-cutting issues and MEA contributions to the post-2020 biodiversity framework. In January 2024, Bern III brought together representatives from 16 MEAs to map MEA strategies to the GBF targets, among other activities. In 2025, an expert workshop reviewed GBF implementation and developed suggestions on ways MEAs could provide complementary inputs to the CBD's global review of collective progress in GBF implementation. The workshop also planned for a possible Bern IV conference in 2027.

In addition to launching this synergies dialogue on biodiversity, the CBD Parties have also sought to foster a dialogue on synergies among the Rio Conventions. As we reported last year, the CBD COP recognized interdependencies between climate and biodiversity, urged stronger collaboration with the UNFCCC, and invited views on options for a potential joint work program of the Rio conventions for consideration during the 2025 meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA). At the September SBSTTA meeting, the Executive Secretaries of the Rio Conventions launched the Rio Synergies platform to showcase areas of cooperation among the three conventions and provide insights on how countries, communities, and institutions can leverage synergies for greater impact.

While synergies with climate change have increasingly been incorporated into the climate COP Presidency-led initiatives, and the presidencies of the Rio Convention COPs issued a joint statement in Belém with

Juan Carlos Navarro, Minister of Environment, Panama, with Briseida Iglesias López de Guerrero, founder of the Bundorgan Women's Network, at the first Session of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) and Other Provisions Related to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (SB8j 1). (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

a pledge to promote dialogue, the issue has had slower uptake in the negotiating rooms. Past action agendas have brought discussions on topics ranging from health to water, cities, agriculture and food security, methane, and forests to the meeting venues, but not to the UNFCCC agenda. Some proposed elevating the issue of synergies at the UNFCCC under the agenda item on cooperation with other international organizations, but COP 30 did not close with a formal decision on this issue. Discussions noted the work by the Joint Liaison Group (JLG) of the Rio Conventions secretariats and requested the UNFCCC secretariat strengthen its engagement in the JLG, but any decision was punted to 2026. Submissions on enhancing the inclusiveness of cooperation with other international organizations were invited by May 1, 2026.

Many have frequently raised joint national reporting and monitoring arrangements as options for promoting synergies among conventions. During the UNCCD's December 2025 meeting of the Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention, host Panama shared ongoing efforts to harmonize its national reporting to all three Rio Conventions. It highlighted the challenges faced in managing different reporting cycles, including inefficient use of human and financial resources. Having transitioned to a single, integrated national report, the "Nature Pledge," Panama reported it has created the Panama Nature Fund to support a synergies approach for funding. It is also developing a new governance model bringing together all relevant ministries and sectoral agencies to support integrated reporting. Panama's approach offers a valuable lesson for others to build on.

The World's Parliament on the Environment

The year closed with attention to synergies, this time at the December meeting of the UN Environment Assembly. At a very practical level, the second MEA day organized at UNEA brought together representatives from MEAs with government and stakeholder groups for dialogues, workshops, and informal exchanges. The UNEA resolution on "Maximizing existing resources through enhanced coherence and synergies in MEAs and implementation" identifies actions to be taken at national, subregional, and international levels. Member states are encouraged to explore approaches for implementing synergies at the national and local levels. Regional and subregional cooperation bodies are invited to facilitate multilateral and multistakeholder cooperation for promoting synergies, cooperation, or collaboration. And UNEP, which serves as the secretariat for UNEA and institutional home for most of the biodiversity- and chemicals and waste-related MEAs, is encouraged to

help countries make their reporting to MEAs more efficient and to continue providing support to the Bern Process.

Accountability and MEAs

Most MEAs do not have built-in compliance or enforcement mechanisms. They rely on national monitoring and reporting to bring transparency and accountability—core principles of good governance that build trust among countries.

As we note in Chapter 2, the showpiece of national reporting in 2025—the third round of climate pledges under the Paris Agreement—was not up to expectations. NDCs represent countries' plans to meet global climate goals. The Paris Agreement's enhanced transparency framework is a system for countries to report on how well they did to take action and provide support. Most Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs) were submitted in 2025. The 100+ BTRs and national inventory reports received by April 15 provide evidence of sounder policies, new institutions, and whole-of-society approaches driving change to achieve global climate objectives. UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell called BTRs "a vital enabling tool to build [a] stronger evidence base for more ambitious policies, drive greater investment and more resilient economies."

While the Paris Agreement's transparency framework is relatively young, others are well established. In the CBD, parties agreed to include national biodiversity strategies and action plans and national reports in the first global report that will evaluate collective progress toward reaching GBF goals and targets, to be drafted by mid-2026. Many underscored the importance of updated national data for ensuring the report is representative and robust.

Ultimately, synergistic approaches and accountability mechanisms are two sides of the same coin. Panama's Nature Pledge is a good example of how they play out in national policy-making. Building on the interdependencies of the Rio Conventions, this initiative uses resources efficiently to report on the country's efforts in three interrelated processes. In doing so, it ensures transparency and accountability, doing more with less.


COP30

← At UNFCCC COP 30 at a press conference spearheaded by Colombia and the Netherlands, more than 80 countries demanded an outcome on fossil fuel phaseout. (Mike Muzurakis/ENB)

Chapter 4.

Looking to 2026

In 2026, we embark on the final sprint toward the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs. Amid the now-familiar geopolitical turmoil, we will begin to see early signs of whether efforts to reform global governance are effective.

In 2026, countries will need to find a way forward on the plastic pollution treaty. This will be no easy feat. The last round of talks ended with no clarity on key issues—or the way forward. Even as some private companies step up to pledge action, they won't solve the plastic problem by themselves. Stakeholders' suspicions about greenwashing highlight the need for collaboration and partnerships. A 1-day session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution (INC) early in 2026 will address organizational and administrative issues, including the election of a new chair. No substantive negotiations will take place at this time. As commentators explore less-than-perfect alternatives to consensus decision making, at a minimum, these negotiations will need an influx of trust and goodwill if the possibility of a strong agreement is to emerge from this process.

New chemicals and wastes bodies will take their first steps. The first session of the ISP-CWP plenary will elect officers and discuss operational, financial, and budgetary arrangements for the Panel. Some point to the 1-year hiatus in negotiations before agreement on the ISP-CWP was reached, and hope for a parallel timeline for the plastics INC. The Global Framework on Chemicals (GFC) will hold its First International Conference. Adopted in 2023, the GFC guides countries and stakeholders in addressing the full life cycle of chemicals while preventing adverse impacts on human health and the environment. Participants in this process, too, will no doubt be mindful of how the plastics talks shape up.

2026 will be busy. All three Rio Conventions convene their COPs (the UNFCCC convenes annually, while the CBD and UNCCD meet every other year). It will be up to the parties to better link policies and actions on biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation, but the growing interest in synergies approaches, along with the push for efficiency, may bring more results to these discussions. A potential Bern IV conference in 2027 could further strengthen those synergies.

In the absence of substantive outcomes on fossil fuels and deforestation at COP 30, its Brazilian Presidency will prepare roadmaps on transitioning away from fossil fuels in a just and equitable manner and on halting and reversing deforestation. Whether these roadmaps will find traction in the negotiations remains to be seen. The First International Conference on the Just Transition Away from Fossil Fuels, which will meet in Colombia in April, will preview what the 80+ governments

that supported a COP 30 decision on this issue are ready to propose.

Climate COP 31 will be unique. For the first time, two countries will share the Presidency. Türkiye will carry the responsibility over the Action Agenda, and Australia will be the "Presidency of negotiations." It's a high-risk experiment. Potential disagreements within the Presidency could slow down the process—or this partnership could build trust, bridge differences, and broker an ambitious outcome.

The primary focus of biodiversity COP 17 will be the implementation of the GBF. In their deliberations, delegates will draw on the first global evaluation of collective progress in reaching GBF goals and targets, to be prepared ahead of the conference.

On drought, UNCCD COP 17 will pick up where COP 16 left off. Again, parties will try to agree whether to negotiate a framework or a legally binding protocol for addressing drought worldwide. We'll also see whether countries will heed calls for anchoring land degradation neutrality in national development strategies and for linking to broader policy frameworks on drought, biodiversity, and climate.

In addition to these "usual suspects," we will be watching how the global water agenda progresses. SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) will undergo an in-depth review by the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The 2026 UN Water Conference will convene at the end of the year, following a series of preparatory meetings and consultations. With the first-ever UN System-wide Strategy on Water and Sanitation and its implementation plan firmly in place, the conference will address themes that link water to other objectives of the 2030 Agenda, including water in multilateral processes and how water will be reflected in a post-2030 development agenda.

Another issue to be elevated in global discussions in 2026 is health. At the global level, the World Health Organization Pandemic Agreement has entered its implementation phase. The UN General Assembly's second high-level meeting on pandemic prevention, preparedness, and response will coordinate with the World Health Organization process. Health concerns will also continue to feature in discussions on water for people at the 2026 UN Water Conference and at the First International Conference of the GFC, which guides countries and stakeholders to prevent chemicals' harmful impacts on human health.

Critical minerals will be on the frontlines of geopolitical rivalry in 2026. Demand for critical minerals is set to almost triple by 2030, driven by the move from fossil fuels to renewable energy. China has emerged as the global leader in renewables. In the first 6

months of 2025, China's investments in the metals and mining sector through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) surpassed the full year of 2024, reaching a new high of about USD 24.9 billion, of which about USD 10 billion was invested in mining. China's BRI spreads across some 150 countries in all of the world's regions, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa. China is also the leading refiner of 19 out of 20 critical minerals, with an average market share of 70%. While governments will need to continue to rethink mining practices to add value and equity beyond extraction, they will also need to grapple with risks associated with reliance on a small number of suppliers, including vulnerability to disruptions from extreme weather, technical failure—or trade.

The situation with deep-sea mining regulations remains uncertain. Coming out of the last negotiations round, the text was far from agreed. Torn between urgency to deliver a robust set of rules and caution in the face of potentially irreparable harm to deep-sea ecosystems, the task facing the International Seabed Authority Council is nothing short of "monumental." Will 2026 deliver a deep-sea mining code? Will countries that are not party to UNCLOS, such as the United States, regard these rules favourably?

Stakeholders will spend 2026 gearing up for the 2027 SDG Summit, where the 17 Goals will be reviewed for the last time before 2030, and official negotiations on a post-2030 development agenda will begin. In addition, the Secretary-General's independent High-Level Expert Group will report back to the UN General Assembly with recommendations for indicators of sustainable development that complement or go beyond GDP.

There are hopes on the financing front. The Global Environment Facility's ninth replenishment cycle, which kicks off in July and runs through June 2030, aligns with the timeframe for the 2030 Agenda's delivery. It also coincides with calls for global financial architecture reform. A pledging session is scheduled for April 9.

Critical to watch will be the interplay between continued efforts to reform global governance, including the international financial architecture, the beyond 2030 discussions, and the UN80 Initiative. Adding complexity to these efforts is the U.S. disengagement from 65+ international organizations and UN entities.

We will be watching closely how members of these institutions take their work forward in this new multilateral-minus-one configuration. As countries get ready to tackle fossil fuels at a conference outside a formal UN process, we wonder if 2026 might bring more visionary approaches to reinvent multilateralism.