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6. International Environmental Governance

International Environmental Governance (IEG) refers to the collective framework of institutions, processes, and agreements through which the global community addresses environmental challenges and promotes sustainable development. It encompasses the structures and mechanisms established by the United Nations and its partners to coordinate policy, set standards, and implement international environmental law.

There is no final and agreed-upon definition of International Environmental Governance (IEG), either by the UN system or by academia. In general, IEG refers to the collective framework of institutions, processes, and agreements through which the global community addresses environmental and sustainable development challenges, identifies problems, and allows stakeholders to decide on how to implement environmental solutions and promote sustainable development. IEG also encompasses the structures and mechanisms established by the United Nations and its member states to coordinate policy, set standards and norms, and implement international environmental law.



There are several actors in the global IEG system. A key actor in this system is the [United Nations Environment Assembly \(UNEA\)](#)¹³⁶, supported by its [Committee of Permanent Representatives](#)¹³⁷ and a Bureau, which together provide global environmental policy direction for UNEP. The IEG framework also includes a multitude of legally binding [multilateral environmental agreements \(MEAs\)](#)¹³⁸, covering issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, water, oceans, and land degradation—each administered through specialised secretariats and conventions. There are more than 250 registered MEAs in force today.

Complementing these global mechanisms are regional commissions and agreements, which adapt international principles to local contexts and promote cooperation across borders. Through this layered governance structure, the international community seeks to respond coherently to the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, advancing collective action toward a more sustainable and resilient future.

What is Governance?

The term *governance* is understood differently by different actors. Recognising these differences can foster mutual understanding among stakeholders, academics, and government practitioners. Our efforts to explain governance in International Environmental Governance IEG above - *the collective framework of institutions, processes, and agreements through which actors address challenges and promote solutions* - closely align with how public administration scholars approach the term. For example, the European Commission's Toolbox Quality of Public Administration 2025 defines governance as *'the whole of interactions in which government, other public bodies, private sector and civil society participate (in one way or another), aimed at solving public challenges or creating public opportunities.'*¹³⁹ Governance is about 'who does what' in government, how it is organised and coordinated, how it changes over time, and how relations with stakeholders outside government are managed. Policy, on the other hand, is the 'what' - the visions, objectives, strategies, and instruments. In this view, governance and policy are two sides of the same coin.

Public administration, as a subfield of political science, studies how government organisations function. It often defines governance as the structures, processes, and norms through which public institutions conduct affairs, make and implement decisions, and interact with citizens and other stakeholders to achieve collective goals.

Political scientists and practitioners who emphasise participatory processes define governance more broadly as the ways in which public institutions engage with stakeholders. From this perspective, governance is a dynamic process of interaction, negotiation, and collaboration among government, stakeholders, including the private sector, to shape policies, allocate resources, and deliver public goods.

Development studies use a different approach: they view governance as an umbrella concept that also includes policy, encompassing "structures, processes and policy content."¹⁴⁰



Finally, economists and organisations such as the World Bank have long focused on *good governance* as a framework emphasising control, coordination, and accountability. Meanwhile, NGOs and advocacy groups often interpret good governance through the lens of transparency, participation, equity, and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

The IEG is perhaps the most pragmatic while remaining broad enough to encompass diverse governance styles. Different cultural contexts and policy challenges tend to favour distinct—or blended—approaches to governance. Among these, hierarchical, network, and market-based governance are the three most widely studied and applied models.

United Nations Environment Assembly

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the world's highest-level decision-making body for matters related to the environment, with a universal membership of all 193 Member States. UNEA sets the global environmental agenda, provides policy guidance, and defines policy responses to address emerging environmental challenges.

The [2012 Conference on Sustainable Development](#)¹⁴¹, “Rio+20”, where the document “[The Future We Want](#)”¹⁴² was adopted, established a set of guidelines and directives (paras 87-90) that UNEA must incorporate, thus setting the global environmental agenda to provide overarching policy guidance and defined policy responses to address emerging environmental challenges; undertake policy review, dialogue, and the exchange of experiences; set the strategic guidance on the future direction of UNEP; and foster partnerships for achieving environmental goals and resource mobilization.

Committee of Permanent Representatives

The [Committee of Permanent Representatives](#)¹⁴³ (CPR) works between sessions of UNEA, making sure UNEA's decisions are being carried out. It is comprised of accredited representatives of all the Member States of the United Nations, of the specialised agencies of the United Nations and of the European Union, whether based in Nairobi or elsewhere. The Committee also provides guidance on UNEA's programme of work and budget, overseeing how UNEP operates. All CPR meetings are open to accredited major groups and stakeholders. This includes meetings of the open-ended Committee of Permanent Representatives and the smaller subcommittee meetings.

UNEA Bureau

The UNEA bureau consists of an elected president, eight vice-presidents, and a rapporteur from among a total of 10 members. These officers constitute the [Bureau of the Environment Assembly](#)¹⁴⁴ and assist the President with the general conduct of the Assembly's business. The officers are selected within each of the [five regional groups](#)¹⁴⁵, which are represented by two

members of the Bureau. Participants of UNEA include the CPR, intergovernmental organisations and multilateral environmental agreements, and major groups and stakeholders.

Intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and multilateral environment agreements (MEAs) can also participate in UNEA discussions through contributing expertise by invitation of the President or Chairperson, though they do not have voting rights.

Accredited Major groups and stakeholders can also engage and participate in the UNEAs. The Major groups are NGOs, Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples and their communities, Workers and Trade Unions, Farmers, Business and Industry, Local Authorities and the Scientific and Technological Community. Though they also cannot vote, they may share their views during sessions.

The Triple Planetary Crisis

The [triple planetary crisis](#)¹⁴⁶ refers to the three main interlinked issues that humanity is currently facing:

- Climate Change
- Pollution
- Biodiversity Loss

These crises are interlinked: rising temperatures threaten species' existence, degraded ecosystems reduce the planet's capacity to absorb carbon, and chemical and waste pollution further undermine environmental and human health. The unsustainable patterns of consumption and production reinforce these crises, and addressing them requires coordinated global action that promotes a healthy planet, sustainable development, and human well-being. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) plays a central role in addressing these challenges through global coordination, science-based policy guidance, and support for the implementation of key multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Among these are three major clusters of international conventions focused on chemicals, biodiversity, and climate.

- **The Chemical Conventions** - Aim to reduce harm caused by hazardous substances and waste to people and the planet. These conventions establish a global framework for managing chemicals throughout their lifecycle.
 - [The Basel Convention](#)¹⁴⁷ (1989) controls transboundary movements of hazardous wastes and promotes environmentally sound waste management.
 - [The Rotterdam Convention](#)¹⁴⁸ (1998) ensures prior informed consent in the international trade of certain hazardous chemicals and pesticides.
 - [The Stockholm Convention](#)¹⁴⁹ (2001) targets persistent organic pollutants (POPs) that remain in the environment and accumulate in living organisms.
 - [The Minamata Convention](#)¹⁵⁰ (2013) addresses mercury pollution, seeking to reduce emissions, releases, and use of mercury globally.

- **The Biodiversity Conventions** seek to protect and restore the planet’s biological diversity while ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources and fair sharing of benefits. These conventions are administered by UNEP.
 - [*The Convention on Biological Diversity*](#)¹⁵¹ (1992) provides the global framework for conserving biodiversity and restoring ecosystems.
 - [*The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety*](#)¹⁵² (2000) focuses on the safe handling and transport of living modified organisms.
 - [*The Nagoya Protocol*](#)¹⁵³ (2010) establishes rules for access to genetic resources and equitable benefit-sharing.
 - Complementary treaties such as the [*Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species*](#)¹⁵⁴ (CITES) and the [*Convention on Migratory Species*](#)¹⁵⁵ (CMS) support this agenda by protecting species across national boundaries.
- **The Climate Conventions** guide international efforts to stabilise the global climate and transition toward low-carbon, climate-resilient development.
 - [*The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change*](#)¹⁵⁶ (UNFCCC) (1992) serves as the foundation for global climate cooperation.
 - [*The Kyoto Protocol*](#)¹⁵⁷ (1997) introduced legally binding emission reduction targets for developed nations.
 - [*The Paris Agreement*](#)¹⁵⁸ (2015) brought all countries together in a shared commitment to limit global warming to well below 2°C—preferably 1.5°C—through nationally determined contributions (NDCs), adaptation measures, and climate finance.

For a more detailed account of the triple planetary crisis, see Chapter 8: Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships on the Triple Planetary Crisis, Chapter 9: Science Bodies for the Triple Planetary Crisis, and Chapter 10: Recent Successes on the Triple Planetary Crisis.

Intergovernmental Group of Ministers and the Cartagena Package

In 2001, UNEP’s Governing Council established an open-ended Intergovernmental Group of Ministers (IGM) to assess existing weaknesses in international environmental governance (IEG) and identify options to strengthen the environmental dimension of sustainable development. The IGM’s mandate focused on enhancing environmental governance as part of broader sustainable development efforts.

The IGM’s work culminated in 2002 with the adoption of a decision at the Seventh Special Session of the Governing Council/GMEF, accompanied by the IGM report, which became known as the Cartagena Package.¹⁵⁹ Key recommendations included:

1. Improved Coherence in International Environmental Policymaking
 - Review the role and structure of the Governing Council/GMEF
 - Consider universal membership of the GMEF

- Explore back-to-back meetings of the GMEF and MEAs
 - Encourage participation of other ministries on cross-cutting issues
 - Establish an intergovernmental panel on global environmental change
2. Strengthening UNEP's Role and Financial Base
 - Secure predictable funding from all UN member states
 - Encourage contributions to UNEP's Environment Fund, including a voluntary indicative scale of contributions
 - UN General Assembly to consider allocating necessary funding
 3. Enhanced Coordination Among and Effectiveness of MEAs
 - Promote synergies and linkages between MEAs
 - Periodically review MEA effectiveness, including compliance mechanisms
 - Co-locate MEA secretariats and consider additional subsidiary bodies
 - Support enhanced national coordination on MEAs
 4. Capacity-Building, Technology Transfer, and Country-Level Coordination
 - Strengthen UNEP programmes on capacity-building and collaboration with UNDP
 - Provide training to improve national institutions and local coordination of environmental governance
 - Facilitate access to environmentally sound technologies and financial resources for developing countries
 5. Enhanced UN System Coordination - Role of the Environmental Management Group (EMG)
 - Annual reporting to the Governing Council/GMEF
 - UNEP participation in the UN Development Group (UNDG)
 - Leverage the technical capacities of specialised agencies to support UNEP-led capacity building
 - Ensure senior-level participation and adequate funding

Following the Cartagena Package, the Governing Council/GMEF adopted several implementation measures, including a pilot phase of the voluntary indicative scale of contributions in 2003, which increased participation from 74 to 126 countries. UNEP also advanced capacity-building and technology support through the [Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building](#)¹⁶⁰ (2005), aimed at strengthening developing countries and economies in transition at all levels.

Regarding science and assessment, the 22nd session of the Governing Council/GMEF in 2003 launched the Science Initiative¹⁶¹, inviting submissions on environmental assessment gaps and needs. This led to the proposal of Environment Watch in 2005,¹⁶² intended as a coherent framework for monitoring global environmental trends. Discussions on Environment Watch



continued under the UNEP Consultative Group of Ministers and High-level Representatives, established in 2009.

Other Environmental Conventions

Beyond the major clusters addressing chemicals, biodiversity, and climate, several other international conventions and regional frameworks play vital roles in advancing global environmental governance. These agreements focus on the sustainable management of freshwater, oceans, and land resources, while regional commissions facilitate cooperation and implementation tailored to local contexts. Together, they form an interconnected system that reinforces the objectives of the triple planetary crisis response.

- **The Water Conventions** provide frameworks for the sustainable management and protection of transboundary freshwater resources. They promote equitable water sharing, pollution prevention, and adaptation to climate-induced water stress.
 - [The Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes](#)¹⁶³ (*Water Convention, 1992*)—under the [UN Economic Commission for Europe](#)¹⁶⁴ (UNECE)—establishes principles for cooperation among countries sharing freshwater systems.
 - [The Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses](#)¹⁶⁵ (1997), adopted by the UN General Assembly, governs international rivers and lakes, emphasising equitable and reasonable use and the obligation to prevent significant harm.
- **The Ocean Conventions** work to conserve and sustainably use marine and coastal ecosystems.
 - The [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea](#)¹⁶⁶ (UNCLOS, 1982) serves as the comprehensive legal framework governing all aspects of ocean use, including navigation rights, resource exploitation, and marine environmental protection.
 - The [Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter](#)¹⁶⁷ (*London Convention, 1972*) and its 1996 *Protocol* regulate marine pollution from dumping activities.
 - [Regional Seas Conventions](#)¹⁶⁸, coordinated by UNEP under the [Regional Seas Programme](#)¹⁶⁹, complement global frameworks by promoting collective action for marine conservation at the regional level.
- **The Land Conventions** address sustainable land management, the combat of desertification, and the restoration of ecosystems to support livelihoods and food security.
 - [The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification](#)¹⁷⁰ (*UNCCD, 1994*) is the primary global treaty focused on land degradation, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. It promotes sustainable land use practices, drought resilience, and the achievement of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN).

- Other complementary frameworks, such as the [Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#)¹⁷¹ (1971). Though not a UN-initiated convention, but by stakeholder groups and initiatives under the Global Soil Partnership, which reinforce efforts to preserve soil health and safeguard ecosystems that provide essential services for human well-being.) It is administered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Regional Commissions and their Regional Conventions

Other conventions play a part in protecting the environment as well. The United Nations has five regional commissions that play a key role in advancing environmental governance and sustainable development at the regional level. Each commission - Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, and Western Asia - adapts global environmental priorities to regional contexts, promoting cooperation among neighbouring countries and aligning efforts with the SDGs.

[United Nations Economic Commission for Europe \(UNECE\)](#)¹⁷² - Established several landmark environmental conventions that promote cooperation and environmental protection across national borders. Key agreements include:

- [Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters \(Aarhus Convention\)](#)¹⁷³ - ensures transparency and public involvement in environmental governance.
- [Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution \(CLRTAP\)](#)¹⁷⁴ - addresses air pollution that crosses national borders through coordinated emission reduction efforts.
- [Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context \(Espoo Convention\)](#)¹⁷⁵ - requires countries to assess the environmental impacts of certain projects before approval, especially those with potential cross-border effects.
- [Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes \(Water Convention\)](#)¹⁷⁶ - promotes the sustainable management of shared water resources.
- [Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents](#)¹⁷⁷ - helps countries prevent, prepare for, and respond to industrial accidents with transboundary impacts.

[United Nations Economic Commission for Africa \(UNECA\)](#)¹⁷⁸ - Supports African nations in integrating environment and sustainable development into their national and regional policies. It focuses on managing natural resources, combating desertification, and building resilience to climate change, in alignment with the African Union's environmental frameworks and the SDGs.

[United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean \(ECLAC\)](#)¹⁷⁹ - Promotes environmental governance and public participation in Latin America and the Caribbean through the [Escazú Agreement](#)¹⁸⁰—the [Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters](#)¹⁸¹. This landmark treaty, adopted in 2018,



Stakeholder Forum
for a sustainable future

strengthens transparency, safeguards environmental defenders, and ensures that citizens have a voice in environmental decision-making.

[United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific](#)

[\(ESCAP\)](#)¹⁸² - Facilitates cooperation among Asia-Pacific nations on environmental issues such as sustainable resource management, disaster risk reduction, and climate adaptation. While the region does not yet have a binding environmental convention similar to UNECE's or ECLAC's, ESCAP serves as a platform for regional coordination and capacity building.

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