A Pocket Guide to Environment and Sustainable Development Governance

THIRD EDITION

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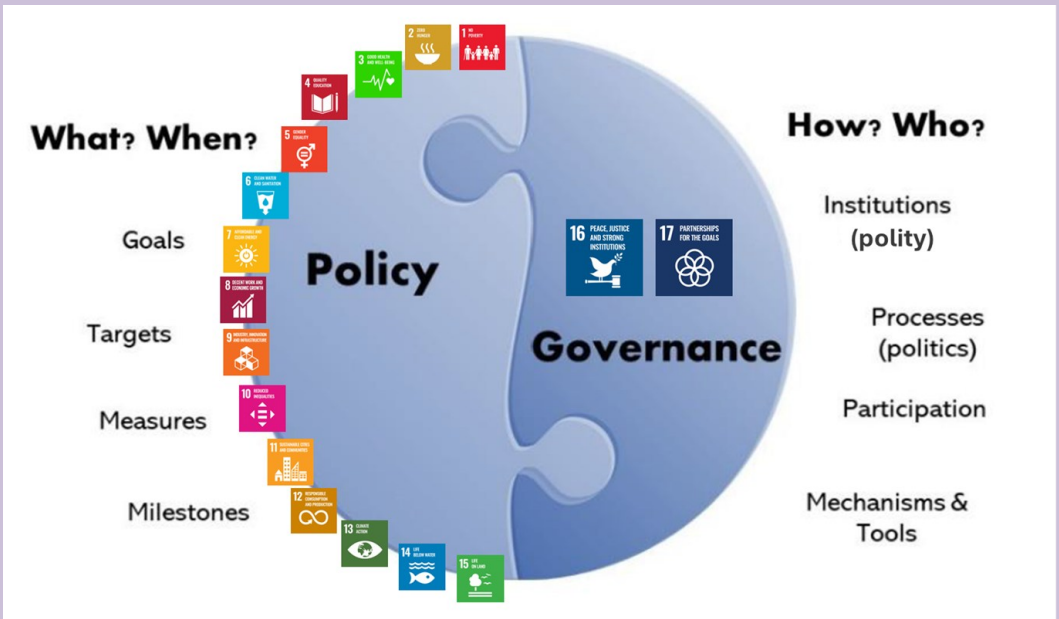
About this Guide

This guide was composed by a team from Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF). It follows version one and two, 2011 and 2012, respectively, which were a joint initiative of SF and the Commonwealth Secretariat, in response to the perceived 'knowledge gap' on the history and dynamics of global governance for sustainable development.

The adoption on September 25, 2015, of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) marked an increased focus on governance issues. Policy objectives and targets ("What") are key, but they cannot be implemented without adequate and tailored governance frameworks ("How?"). This Pocket guide is not about setting policy targets, but about how to achieve them.

Policy and governance are two sides of one coin, or two pieces of the same puzzle.



Graph based on Meuleman, L. 2025, 'Waking up a Sleeping beauty? – Towards a quality protocol for indicator SDG 17.14.1 on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD)'. DG REFORM & ICF, Publications Office of the European Union.

All SDGs have, besides policy targets, also governance targets (marked with letters). However, SDG 16 (institutions, rule of law) and 17 (partnerships, means of implementation, policy coherence) offer the most cross-cutting governance concepts.

This Guide starts with sustainable development as a foundation, but then concentrates on environmental governance as one of the three dimensions of sustainability governance.

We hope that this Guide will provide the necessary background information on global environmental and sustainable development governance to allow both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders to familiarise themselves with key issues more comprehensively.

The topic of 'environmental and sustainable development governance' is potentially vast, as governance touches on almost all decisions and policy considerations at all levels. To make this guide manageable and accessible, we have structured the main issues into 12 short chapters.

It is important to note that the insights and ideas outlined in the Guide are not exhaustive. This is partly because the editorial process had to include some level of selection to avoid the publication becoming unwieldy. Some of the information contained in this updated version of the Pocket Guide may become redundant as a result of the outcome of upcoming global events.

In addition, this version of the Pocket Guide is a draft to be presented during UNEA 7 in December 2025 in Nairobi. Comments will be integrated at the beginning of 2026 and evolve to a final version.

Many thanks go to the SF team that collaborated on this draft: Felix Dodds (Project Lead & Co-author), Rene Marker-Katz (Researcher & Co-author), Jan-Gustav Strandenaes (Lead Consultant & Editor), and Louis Meuleman & Charles A. Nouhan (Contributing Authors).

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To all contributors, reviewers, and supporters—thank you. Your efforts continue to advance understanding of sustainable development governance and inspire ongoing collaboration in pursuit of a more just and resilient world.

Editors' Note

This guide offers a high-level overview of sustainable development governance and the major actors shaping it. It is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather a starting point for understanding the landscape. Where possible, links and references are included to support deeper exploration and further research.

Contents

You can download individual chapters of ***A Pocket Guide to Environment and Sustainable Development Governance*** by visiting the dedicated portal created for it **here**.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CIFs	Climate Investment Funds
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSD	UN Commission on Sustainable Development
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CTE	Committee on Trade and Environment
CTF	Clean Technology Fund
DSD	Division for Sustainable Development
ECOFIN	Economic and Financial Committee
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EMG	Environmental Management Group
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GEO	Global Environment Organisation
GMEF	Global Ministerial Environment Forum
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
IACSD	Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development
ICE	International Court for the Environment
IEG	International Environmental Governance
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IFI	International Financial Institution
IGM	Intergovernmental Group of Ministers
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
JPOI	Johannesburg Plan of Implementation
MEAs	Multilateral Environmental Agreements
MEF	Major Economies Forum
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PIC	Prior Informed Consent
PP	Precautionary Principle
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation in Developing Countries
SCF	Strategic Climate Fund
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCCD	UN Convention to Combat Desertification
UNCED	UN Conference on Environment and Development
UNCSD	UN Conference on Sustainable Development
UNCTAD	UN Conference on Trade and Development
UNDESA	UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs
UNDG	UN Development Group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	UN Economic Commission for Europe
UNEO	UN Environment Organisation
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
WEO	World Environment Organisation
WHO	World Health Organization
WSSD	World Summit on Sustainable Development
WTO	World Trade Organization

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UN Headquarters in NYC, 1968.[1]

1. A History of Environmental and Sustainable Development Governance

Timeline

Key Milestones Since 1992

The following timeline outlines major global processes that have, over the past three decades, shaped government processes and systems as they relate to the environment and sustainable development.

1992 – UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Earth Summit)

- Establishes three legally binding environmental conventions (CBD, UNFCCC, UNCCD).

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- Establishes global processes that have, over the past three decades, shaped governance processes and systems as these relate to the environment and sustainable development.
- Issues recommendations on strengthening the institutional framework for the environment and sustainable development (Chapters 38 and 39 of Agenda 21).
- Gives UNEP a new and expanded mandate to work on environmental issues.
- Chapter 38.22 strengthened UNEP's role in stimulating and promoting environmental activities and considerations throughout the United Nations system.

1996 – UNEP's Governing Council Adopts the Nine Major Groups

- Adopts the use of the Nine Major Groups when referring to the global NGO community participating in UN affairs.

1997/1998 – Task Force on Environment and Human Settlements

- Formed as part of the Secretary-General's reform plan, *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*.
- Produces 24 recommendations across seven thematic areas to improve coherence and performance within the UN's environmental and human settlements work.
- UNECE adopts the Aarhus Convention, granting the public rights to access environmental information, participate in environmental decision-making, and seek justice in environmental matters.

2000 – Millennium Agreements

- Millennium Summit and Millennium Declaration, which established the 8 Millennium Development Goals, of which 7 focused on environmental sustainability.
- The establishment of the Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF) and the adoption of the Malmoe Declaration at UNEP's Governing Council's 6th session, strengthening environmental governance.

2002 – Cartagena Package

- A set of recommendations from the Open-ended Intergovernmental Group of Ministers and High-level Representatives (established in 2001).
- Focuses on strengthening international environmental governance (IEG).

2002 – World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg)

- Type II Partnerships: A major governance shift was the introduction of Type II Partnerships—voluntary, multi-stakeholder initiatives involving governments, NGOs, and the private sector to supplement government-led "Type I" agreements.

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- Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD): The summit emphasised strengthening the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and enhancing the role of regional commissions in monitoring progress.
- Corporate Accountability: Outcomes included a focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and accountability, urging the private sector to contribute actively to sustainable societies.
- Local Agenda 21: The summit reinforced the Local Agenda 21 process, encouraging sub-national and local governments to adapt global sustainability goals to their specific context.

2003 to 2008 – Helsinki Process on Globalisation and Democracy

- Joint initiative of Finland and Tanzania seeking innovative responses to global governance challenges.
- Includes a dedicated track on "New Approaches to Global Problem Solving," exploring alternative governance models.

2005 – Bali Strategic Plan for Technology Support and Capacity Building

- Adopted by UNEP's Governing Council.
- Enhances UNEP's role in capacity building, strengthening its support to developing countries and economies in transition.

2005 – World Summit and Swiss/Mexican Ambassadors Process

- The UN General Assembly launches an environmental governance reform process following paragraph 169 of the World Summit Outcome Document.
- Discussions continue through 2008–2009, exploring institutional options for strengthening IEG.

2005/2006 – Secretary-General's High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence

- Established after the 2005 World Summit to improve UN system coherence.
- Issues recommendations on environment, sustainable development, and organisational alignment across UN agencies.

2008 – Joint Inspection Unit Review of Environmental Governance in the UN System

- Provides system-wide recommendations to break the stalemate in IEG reform.

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- Reinforces longstanding concerns around coherence, coordination, integration, and predictable financing.

2009 – UNEP Consultative Group of Ministers and High-level Representatives on IEG

- Convenes to overcome deadlock in IEG reform.
- Examines both functional and institutional reform options for UNEP and the broader system.

2010 – Climate Justice Tribunal

- Civil-society-led people's tribunal created to hold states accountable for environmental harm.
- Though outside formal UN processes, it gains endorsement from several countries (notably Bolivia), illustrating alternative governance models.
- Nusa Dua Declaration signed on environmental governance, consolidating the Basel, Stockholm, and Rotterdam Conventions by UNEP, GMEF/GC, and the Extraordinary Meetings of the Conferences of the Parties (ExCOP) in Bali.

2010 – UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability

- Established to develop recommendations for the Rio+20 preparatory process.
- Mandate includes institutional frameworks for sustainable development and emerging sustainability challenges.

2012 – Report of the High-level Panel on Global Sustainability

- *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing* was released.
- Offers 56 recommendations to accelerate sustainable development globally, presenting a comprehensive call to action for system-wide reform.

2009 to 2012 – UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20)

- UNGA identifies the "institutional framework for sustainable development" as a core theme (2009).
- Preparatory process debates options for reform, culminating in Rio+20 outcomes, including the decision to establish the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

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2013 – Mandate Given to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF)

- Replaces the Commission on Sustainable Development.
- Becomes the central UN platform for reviewing and guiding progress toward sustainable development.
- After years of negotiations within the framework of UNEP, the Minamata Convention was adopted, forbidding the use of mercury and mercury compounds.

2013 to 2015 – Development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- Open Working Group drafts the 17 SDGs through an inclusive, multi-stakeholder negotiation process.
- The UN Environment Assembly with universal membership replaces UNEP's Governing Council in 2014.
- SDGs adopted in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda.

2015 – Paris Agreement on Climate Change

- Landmark global accord under the UNFCCC.
  Commits nations to limit warming to well below 2°C and pursue efforts to stay below 1.5°C.
- Escazú Agreement, developed as a direct result of Rio+20 and administered by UNECLA, was agreed to by 2018.

2019 – High-level Review of the 2030 Agenda (SDG Summits)

- First quadrennial review of SDG progress under the HLPF.
- Assesses global progress and identifies gaps in implementation.

2022 – The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment

- First agreed to in 1972 at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution on these rights in 2021, and finally in 2022, 50 years after the Stockholm conference (which founded UNEP).
- COP15 on biodiversity agrees to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to halt/reverse biodiversity loss by 2030.

2023 – High-level Review of the 2030 Agenda

- Second major stock take.

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- Highlights accelerating challenges—including climate impacts, biodiversity loss, and financing gaps—while calling for scaled-up ambition and renewed international cooperation.

The governance of environmental protection and sustainable development has evolved significantly over the past several decades, shaped by landmark international conferences, emerging scientific knowledge, and shifting geopolitical landscapes. Its history reflects a gradual transition from fragmented, sector-specific initiatives to a more integrated, multi-level, and multi-stakeholder system of global governance. Understanding this history is essential for appreciating the institutional structures, policy instruments, and collaborative mechanisms that underpin contemporary environmental governance.

The modern era of international environmental governance is often traced to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972. It marked the first major global effort to place environmental issues on the international agenda, resulting in the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). UNEP's mandate was to coordinate global environmental activities, provide policy guidance, and catalyse the development of international norms and standards. Early environmental governance efforts were top-down and technical, focusing on specific environmental problems such as pollution, deforestation, and chemical hazards.

The 1990s represented a pivotal period of transformation, beginning with the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly known as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Earth Summit produced several landmark outcomes, including Agenda 21, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and the Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for the Management, Conservation, and Sustainable Development of Forests. These instruments emphasised the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and economic issues, marking a shift from isolated environmental initiatives toward integrated sustainable development governance. The Summit also underscored the importance of participatory governance, involving governments, Major Groups, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes.

Following the Earth Summit, the international governance architecture expanded with the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to oversee the implementation of Agenda 21. The early 1990s also saw the adoption of critical multilateral environmental agreements, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD), and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). These treaties introduced mechanisms for reporting, compliance, and policy integration, institutionalising principles of sustainability, precaution, and equity into national and international decision-making. At the same time, challenges such as limited technical capacity, funding constraints, and political fragmentation highlighted the need for stronger institutional frameworks and more effective coordination.

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The early 21st century witnessed the consolidation of governance structures and the integration of environmental sustainability into broader development agendas. The adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 incorporated environmental targets alongside social and economic objectives, reinforcing the understanding that environmental degradation and social inequality are mutually reinforcing. During this period, UNEP's role as the UN's environmental conscience became more prominent, though the organisation continued to face limitations in budget, authority, and institutional leverage compared with specialised agencies. Governance innovations, such as the engagement of Major Groups and Stakeholders in UNEP processes, strengthened participatory mechanisms and set the stage for the later Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Rio+20 Conference in 2012 further advanced global governance for the environment and sustainable development by addressing two primary themes: the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development. Rio+20 catalysed the formal development of the SDGs, the establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), and the establishment of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to oversee follow-up and review processes. This period marked a shift toward a more integrated, multi-stakeholder governance model, emphasising accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making.

From 2012 onwards, global environmental governance has had to adapt to increasingly complex challenges. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion have intensified, while geopolitical tensions, economic inequality, and governance fragmentation complicate multilateral coordination. Reports such as the Global Sustainable Development Reports (GSDRs) highlight persistent barriers, including limited institutional capacity, uneven resource distribution, and gaps between policy commitments and measurable outcomes. Nevertheless, evolving governance approaches—combining advocacy, co-production, and multi-level stakeholder engagement—demonstrate the capacity for adaptive, responsive, and inclusive mechanisms to address systemic global challenges.

Today, the history of environmental and sustainable development governance illustrates a clear trajectory: from early, issue-specific initiatives towards integrated, multi-scale, and participatory governance. Lessons from past decades inform contemporary strategies, emphasising the need for robust institutions, inclusive decision-making, and mechanisms that translate global commitments into concrete actions at national, subnational, and local levels. As the world approaches the milestones of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, understanding this history is critical for shaping effective, resilient, and equitable environmental governance frameworks for the future.

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2. The Context and the Challenge

Environmental governance includes policy, rules and norms that govern human behaviour, and it also addresses who makes decisions, how decisions are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in the decision-making.

– United Nations Environment Programme

The Context and Foundations of Global Environmental Governance (1992-2000)

The period from 1992 to 2025 has been marked by profound transformations in geopolitical dynamics and a worsening of environmental problems. In response, the period has also witnessed significant efforts to strengthen international environmental governance and to develop global environmental and sustainable development policy frameworks. The period has also seen unprecedented increases in scientific assessments of environmental issues and in understanding how to solve the problems facing the planet. Understanding these historical, political, and institutional contexts is essential for assessing the effectiveness of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[3] and the Medium-Term Strategy[4] of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).[5]

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The 1990s marked a decisive turning point in international environmental governance, characterised by landmark conferences, the establishment of new legal instruments, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change[6], UN Convention on Biological Diversity[7], the UN Convention to Combat Desertification[8], the Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent[9], and a renewed acceleration in the consolidation of global environmental norms. During this decade, environmental considerations became inextricably linked to economic and social development objectives, establishing the foundations of contemporary sustainable development governance.

The most important event for advancing global norms was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)[10], also known as the 'Earth Summit,' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This summit was a watershed moment for global environmental policy.

The Earth Summit produced Agenda 21[11], a comprehensive plan of action addressing environmental, economic, and social dimensions of development. Agenda 21 underscored the interconnections between poverty eradication, environmental protection, and economic growth, offering a blueprint for national and international policy formulation. Its adoption signalled a move away from isolated environmental efforts toward a coordinated, multi-sector approach that emphasises inclusive governance, the integration of environmental goals into development planning, and accountability across all levels of decision-making. For the first time, the framework recognised the rights and responsibilities of nine key stakeholder constituencies—referred to as the Major Groups: Women, Children and Youth, Indigenous Peoples, Non-Governmental Organisations, Local Authorities, Workers and Trade Unions, Business and Industry, the Scientific and Technological Community, and Farmers. This recognition marked a significant milestone in global environmental and sustainable development governance, ensuring that these groups had a formal role in international deliberations. Their inclusion extended beyond United Nations forums to other global platforms such as the G7 and G20, embedding participatory engagement as a cornerstone of multilateral environmental decision-making.

At the Earth Summit, countries adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development[12], a set of 27 principles guiding sustainable development and environmental protection. In addition, they agreed on the Forestry Principles[13], a non-legally binding but authoritative global statement outlining shared commitments for the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests. In response to the need for oversight and monitoring of Agenda 21 implementation, the decision was made to establish the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)[14] on 22 December 1992, which was formally established through a resolution adopted on 29 January 1993.

During its initial phase, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) not only reviewed selected chapters of Agenda 21 but also examined the connections between the climate and biodiversity conventions up to 1997. The CSD, during its 21 years, functioned as an innovative governance mechanism, bringing together Member States and Major Groups to ensure

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transparency and accountability. Although initially limited in its resources and operational capacity, the CSD introduced a model for multi-stakeholder engagement that informed subsequent structures within UNEP and other UN institutions. Its work emphasised the importance of integrating scientific data into policymaking and provided a platform for ongoing dialogue between governments and non-state actors, highlighting early lessons in participatory governance.

From 1997 to 2002, the first two days of the Commission of Sustainable Development held an interactive dialogue between stakeholders and member states before moving to negotiate the political outcomes. Its most successful dialogue was on tourism, where it was estimated that up to 70% of the negotiated outcome stemmed from ideas presented in the multistakeholder dialogue with member states.
The 1990s saw several UN interlinked conferences and summits that were focused on advancing global social and sustainable development agendas by addressing human rights, equity, and the social dimensions of sustainability that complemented the goals of Agenda 21 and the Rio Earth Summit, including:

- 1990 - The Children's Summit
- 1993 - The World Conference on Human Rights
- 1995 - The World Summit for Social Development
- 1995 - The Fourth World Conference on Women
- 1996 - Habitat II (the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements
- 1996 - The World Food Summit
- 1997 - United Nations General Assembly Special Session, otherwise known as Rio+5

The early 1990s also witnessed the adoption of several landmark international agreements at the 1992 Earth Summit. These conventions laid the groundwork for coordinated global action on climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development. The key agreements include:

- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)[15] - Adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit and entering into force on March 21, 1994, the UNFCCC established a framework for international cooperation to combat climate change by stabilising greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere.

- Kyoto Protocol[16] - Adopted in 1997 as a protocol to the UNFCCC, it set legally binding emission reduction targets for developed countries, marking the first concrete step toward implementing the Convention's objectives.

- Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)[17] - Also adopted at the Earth Summit and entering into force on December 29, 1993, the CBD focuses on the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.

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- The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)[18] - Adopted in 1994 and entering into force in 1996, the UNCCD aims to prevent and reverse land degradation and desertification, particularly in arid, semi-arid, and dry sub-humid areas, linking environmental sustainability with poverty reduction and sustainable land management.

- Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent (PIC)[19] - Adopted on 10 September 1998 and entering into force on 24 February 2004 after ratification by 50 countries, the convention establishes the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) procedure, enabling countries to make informed decisions about whether to accept the import of certain hazardous chemicals. This enhanced international cooperation and safety in chemical trade.

These agreements are highly significant in that they codified international commitments to climate mitigation and biodiversity conservation. These treaties introduced mechanisms for reporting, compliance, and policy integration into national planning. The conventions institutionalised the principles of precaution, sustainability, and equity, and set precedents for subsequent multilateral negotiations on climate, biodiversity, and chemical pollutants.

Central to making these commitments effective is the rule of law. While environmental law existed before UNEP, the organisation played a crucial role in transforming it into a coherent global framework. UNEP championed the idea that sound environmental policy must be grounded in scientific evidence and supported by legal norms and enforcement mechanisms. Laws without a foundation in environmental science or shared ethical standards lack both credibility and impact. UNEP's work helped establish environmental jurisprudence as a discipline—one that provides the legal and moral backbone for implementing environmental governance worldwide.

When UNEP began its work in 1972, global and national systems of environmental law were still in their infancy. Over the decades, that landscape transformed dramatically. Environmental jurisprudence has since come to represent not only a legal framework but also a shift in global ethics—acknowledging that both individuals and governments bear responsibility for protecting the natural world. UNEP has been instrumental in this transformation through capacity building, fostering cooperation, and supporting countries in codifying environmental protection within their legal systems.

In 1980, UNEP's Governing Council[20] took a decisive step forward by requesting a framework for the systematic development and review of environmental law (Decision 8/15, 29 April 1980). This led to the establishment of the Montevideo Environmental Law Programme[21], a landmark initiative that continues to guide international legal efforts. The Programme provides a platform for addressing emerging legal issues, strengthening environmental governance, and ensuring that the law keeps pace with scientific and policy advancements. Since its inception, each decade has seen the adoption of a new Montevideo Programme—now brought to the UN Environment Assembly[22]—reflecting the ongoing evolution of global environmental law and UNEP's enduring leadership in this field.

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Despite increased environmental problems, ambitious frameworks, and efforts to translate international commitments into national and international action plans, this was often challenging. Many countries faced limited technical capacity to address environmental issues, inadequate funding, and competing political priorities, hindering effective implementation. UNEP navigated these challenges while reporting through ECOSOC, which sometimes affected the clarity and reach of its communications to the General Assembly. These circumstances reflected broader structural constraints in global environmental governance at the time, rather than the effectiveness or dedication of UNEP itself.

Consolidation, Expansion, and Emerging Crises (2000-2012)

During the 1990s, a series of international summits consistently highlighted poverty eradication as a top global priority. Outcome reports from these gatherings often summarised development priorities, but the environment was rarely included; for example, the Social Summit[23] defined 10 goals, none of which focused explicitly on environmental issues. Influential in shaping negotiators' thinking was the OECD-DAC report *Shaping the 21st Century – The Contribution of Development Cooperation*, which identified environmental protection and sustainable development as critical areas for international attention.

In 2000, the Millennium Development Goals[24] (MDGs) were adopted, which reflected the mindset of the majority of the UN Member States for structural, measurable improvements to the quality of life of all people across the globe. The MGDs were a set of eight international development goals established by the UN following the Millennium Summit[25] in 2000. They were designed to address extreme poverty, social inequality, and environmental sustainability by 2015. The MGDs were built on decades of UN conferences and global development agreements, setting measurable targets to focus the efforts of governments, international organisations, and Major Groups and stakeholders. The eight MDGs are:

1. Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty;
2. Achieve universal primary education;
3. Promote gender equality and empower women;
4. Reduce child mortality;
5. Improve maternal health;
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases;
7. Ensure environmental sustainability;
8. Develop a global partnership for development.

Between the Millennium Summit and the Rio+20 in 2012, serious efforts were made to consolidate and expand environmental and sustainable development governance. Several participants at the Earth Summit had felt that environmental concerns were made subordinate to developmental priorities, and since then, environmental concerns had increasingly

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intersected with economic development. Governance frameworks often reflected these priorities, as well as being forced to accommodate complex global challenges.

Following this, the Millennium Declaration[26], adopted by the UN General Assembly, mandated the UN to develop a set of global targets for the international community to achieve by 2015. Environmental considerations were explicitly integrated through Millennium Development Goal 7[27] (MDG7), which aimed to ensure environmental sustainability.

MGD7 had four targets:

1. To integrate the principles of sustainable development into every nation's policies and programmes, and reverse the depletion of environmental resources;

2. To reduce biodiversity loss and achieve a substantial reduction in the rate of loss by 2010;

3. To halve the proportion of the universal population without sustainable access to clean and safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015 (this target was not in the original set of targets but added by the World Summit in 2002);

4. To achieve substantial improvement in the lives of a minimum of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

The World Summit in Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, also known as 'Rio+10', expanded alongside the MGD7 to reinforce the environmental dimension of the MDGs. It was held in Johannesburg, South Africa (August 26 to September 4th) in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. It had four preparatory meetings, which then adopted four key outcomes:

1. Plan of Implementation[28] - This document outlined actions and goals for achieving sustainable development.

2. Political Declaration - This declaration reaffirmed commitments around the environment and sustainable development, and the importance of factors such as good governance and human rights.

3. Partnerships and Initiatives - A major outcome was the creation of new partnerships to drive action on specific issues. In particular, it focused on the WEHAB framework: Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture, and Biodiversity. Partnerships and additional ones on consumption and production. As environmental problems increased over the years, there was an urgent need for continuous political decision-making to address them, and the Global Ministerial Environment Forum[29] (GMEF) was established, among others, to respond to this challenge. UNEP convened its 6th Special Session to inaugurate this new format, with the first GMEF held in Malmö, Sweden, in 2000.

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4. It added the target on sanitation to MDG 7.

The Stockholm Convention[30] on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), adopted in 2001 and entering into force in 2004, grew out of years of UNEP's scientific and policy work on chemicals and health, including the Governing Council decision 19/13C (1997). While not solely an outcome of MDG7 or the WSSD, the broader political momentum around sustainable development during this period reinforced support for its adoption.

During this period, UNEP's organisational structure and mandate were increasingly scrutinised. Recognised as the 'environmental conscience of the UN,' UNEP's status as an administrative programme limited its institutional leverage compared to that of specialised agencies. Reporting through ECOSOC often filtered or delayed key messages, and UNEP's modest budget constrained its ability to implement comprehensive global programmes. Nevertheless, its headquarters in Nairobi enhanced the representation of the Global South in international environmental governance, providing a platform for regional leadership and enabling partnerships with African institutions. Operational challenges—including infrastructure limitations and regional political instability—required adaptive strategies and incremental capacity-building.

Since the establishment of UNEP in 1972, growing concern over hazardous chemicals and waste has contributed to the development of several foundational international agreements. The *Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants*[31] *(POPs)* seeks to eliminate or restrict the production and use of long-lasting toxic substances, while the *Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent*[32] *(PICs)* ensures transparency in the global trade of hazardous substances. To improve coordination, the *"Super COP"* was established in 2010 and held its first meeting in 2013, bringing together the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions under one joint conference. This framework paved the way for the *2013 Minamata Convention on Mercury*[33], which addresses mercury emissions and pollution. Together, these agreements form the core of the international chemicals and waste regime and reflect decades of UNEP's work on environment and health, distinct from, though complementary to, the more recent framing of global environmental challenges.

This decade saw the acceleration of multiple environmental crises: deforestation, biodiversity loss, desertification, drought, and flooding, and the first observable impacts of climate change. Regional conflicts, climate-related disasters, and economic crises diverted attention and resources. This further complicated environmental governance, and UNEP's monitoring, reporting, and advisory roles were critical in addressing these intersecting challenges, providing evidence-based guidance to national and international policymakers.

The early 2000s also marked the expansion of participatory governance mechanisms. UNEP's Governing Council had adopted the concept and use of the nine Major Groups recognised for their role in sustainable development in 1996, and non-state actors began to engage more actively in UNEP consultations. This reflected the recognition that inclusive decision-making processes would enhance both legitimacy and effectiveness. Multi-stakeholder platforms

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facilitated knowledge sharing, integrated scientific expertise into policy, and fostered collaborative problem-solving.

Global Governance, Policy Challenges, and the 2030 Agenda (2012–2025 and Beyond)

From 2012 onward, geopolitical shifts, such as the rise of nationalism, populism, and protectionism, challenged multilateral institutions and agreements, while the impact of climate change, pollution and environmental destruction intensified globally. Consequently, global governance issues became increasingly complex. Rising greenhouse gas concentrations, extreme weather events, biodiversity loss, marine pollution, and land degradation highlighted the urgent need for cross-sectoral governance strategies. UNEP's role in translating scientific knowledge into actionable policy became increasingly vital.

Held in 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development—commonly known as Rio+20[34]—marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of global environmental governance. Centred on two key themes—the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the development of the institutional framework for sustainable development—the conference reignited international commitment to integrating environmental and development objectives. The conference at Rio+20 resulted in the outcome document *The Future We Want*[35], which called for strengthened global institutions and new mechanisms for coordination and accountability. The Rio+20 outcomes led directly to the creation of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development[36] (HLPF), which in 2013 replaced the Commission on Sustainable Development as the central UN platform for reviewing progress toward sustainable development. It also paved the way for the establishment of the United Nations Environment Assembly[37] (UNEA), granting UNEP universal membership and an enhanced mandate. Most importantly, Rio+20 initiated and agreed to establish the process that culminated in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals[38] (SDGs)—a unified framework that now guides global action toward an integrated vision of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, and is universal: it applies to all countries.

The SDGs became one of the central elements in the plan of action named: "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development". This document, also known as the '2030 Agenda[39]', was adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 2015.

Although all the 17 Goals reflect the three dimensions of sustainable development, they can be grouped in three clusters, with the 'environmental' Goals as the foundation (representing the limits of the planet), the 'economic' Goals as the means or enablers, and the 'social' Goals as the ultimate end. This is reflected in a well-known graph – the 'wedding cake' - originally published by the Stockholm Environment Institute, which has the economic Goals at the top. The Dutch Environmental Assessment Agency, PBL, revised this by putting the economy

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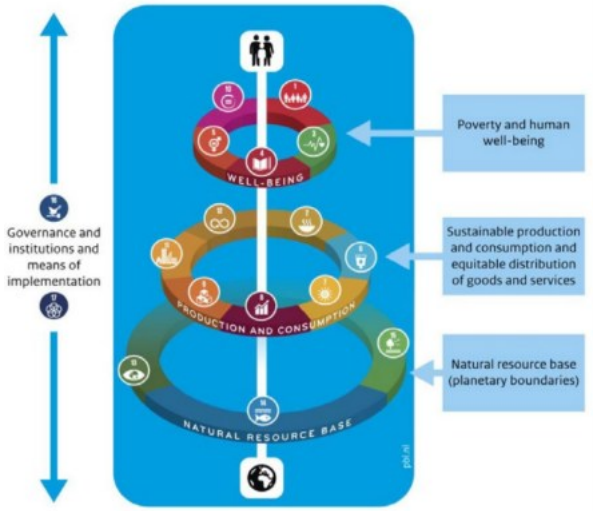
in the middle (i.e., not as an end but as a means). (PBL 2018). The two Goals focusing on governance and other means of implementation (16 and 17) support all the other Goals.



Source: PBL, 2018. Using planetary boundaries to support national implementation of environment-related Sustainable Development Goals[40]

Since 2015, global governance has been increasingly tested by competing political agendas, shifting alliances, and fractured international coordination. Trade disputes, regional tensions, and uneven institutional capacities have complicated collective responses to environmental challenges. These dynamics highlight the vulnerability of current governance systems and emphasise the need for resilient institutions that can manage complex interactions between environmental imperatives and political realities.

The impacts of climate change intensified rather than abated, with record greenhouse gas concentrations, extreme weather events, and ecosystem disruptions. Created by UNEP and the World Meteorological Organisation[41] (WMO) in 1988, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[42] (IPCC) was endorsed by the UN GA in the same year. IPCC currently has 195 Member countries with several thousand scientists from around the world, producing the most reliable reports on climate issues: the Assessment Reports. The IPCC Sixth Assessment Report[43] highlighted that cumulative climate impacts were already affecting food security, water availability, and urban resilience. Concurrently, biodiversity loss, marine pollution, and land degradation emerged as critical systemic challenges, demanding comprehensive, cross-sectoral governance strategies. UNEP's advisory role became increasingly crucial in translating scientific knowledge into actionable policy recommendations.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the Sustainable Development Goals[44] (SDGs), represents a universal framework designed to guide global action on poverty eradication, environmental protection, and inclusive economic growth. Building on the lessons of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs expanded the scope of global

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development priorities from 8 to 17 goals, reflecting a more holistic understanding of the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental challenges. The goals integrate climate action, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable resource management alongside objectives for equality, health, education, and governance. Their development was marked by an unprecedented participatory process involving governments, stakeholders, including the nine Major Groups, academia, and the private sector, emphasising inclusivity, universality, and accountability. As a result, the SDGs established not only a shared vision for sustainable development but also a renewed commitment to aligning national and international policies with long-term environmental and social well-being.

Although the High-level Political Forum has been charged with a key responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the 17 SDGs, all UN entities are involved in implementing the SDGs. As the SDGs are universal in nature, UN member states have also adopted national strategies based on the SDGs.

A clear distinction between policy and governance became central to discussions on SDG implementation. Whereas policy articulates goals and strategies, governance establishes mechanisms to ensure effective execution, monitoring, and accountability. Effective governance structures are essential for translating SDG commitments into measurable outcomes, particularly in a complex global environment characterised by political fragmentation, resource inequality, and competing development priorities. UNEP's evolving approach emphasises evidence-based policymaking, transparency, and participatory governance as critical tools for implementation.

UNEP was given definite tasks by the Rio+20 Summit, among other issues related to sustainable consumption and production. UNEP's evolving approach regarding the 2030 Agenda and solving environmental problems has emphasised evidence-based policymaking, transparency, and participatory governance as critical tools for implementation. Commemorating UNEP's 50th anniversary in 2022, the UN Environment Assembly decided on a Political Declaration strongly emphasising the necessity of strong environmental governance tools, pointing to the legacy of UNEP's fifty year work within this realm and its unique position as the world's leading environmental authority, ideas that have been reflected in the work now being carried out under the mantle of the United Nation's 80th anniversary (UN80).

The United Nations' 80th anniversary in 2025 offered an opportunity to reflect on achievements and ongoing institutional challenges. The UN 80[45] commemoration highlighted the importance of multilateralism, institutional reform, and strengthening UNEP as a central actor in global environmental governance. These reflections have informed discussions about improving the efficiency, reach, and inclusiveness of international environmental governance, while emphasising the need for adaptive strategies in the face of evolving global challenges.

Building on UN80's reflections, UNEP's flagship Outlook Report has watched the horizon of environmental change since 1995, alerting us to how our actions influence our planet. The Global Environmental Outlook[46] (GEO) is a series of reports that review the state and

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direction of the global environment. It is a global process spearheaded by UNEP at the regional, national, and local levels all over the world. The process provides an assessment of the current state of the environment, an evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and actions taken to address environmental issues, and projections of future environmental trends.

UNEP's GEO reports try to provide an independent assessment of the state of the global environment and how trends and policies affect it. The GEOs aim to bridge the gap between science and policy and have a key purpose to inform decision-makers about environmental challenges, evaluate policy responses, and project probable future environmental trends and solutions to guide long-term planning.

The UN family produces a set of fact-based reports on the state of the environment, climate issues, pollution, and, of course, the implementation of the SDGs. Each of the three science-policy bodies: the IPCC on climate, the IPBES on biodiversity, and the latest, which was established by UNEP in June 2025, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution[47] (ISP-CWP), all provide fact-based reports.

The Global Sustainable Development Reports (GSDRs)[48] provide evidence-based assessments of progress toward the SDGs and illuminate persistent systemic challenges. The Global Sustainable Development Report 2019[49] and the Global Sustainable Development Report 2023[50] are issued every four years, providing key science-policy insights into progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. The upcoming edition will be published in 2027.

The GSDRs have so far consistently identified climate change, inequality, unsustainable consumption, and governance weaknesses as significant obstacles. Regional disparities, resource constraints, and limited institutional capacity exacerbate these challenges, particularly in low-income countries. These findings of all these reports underscore the critical need for strengthened governance frameworks that integrate science, policy, and stakeholder input to achieve sustainable development objectives.

The reports emphasise integrated approaches recognising the interconnections among environmental, social, and economic dimensions. They advocate for inclusive governance mechanisms, engagement with Major Groups and Other Stakeholders, Indigenous knowledge systems, and the systematic incorporation of scientific expertise into policymaking. UNEP's role as a coordinating hub underscores the need for institutional capacity, transparency, and multi-level stakeholder engagement to drive transformative change.

Outlining and summarising in broad strokes the global challenges facing humanity, Executive Director of UNEP, Ms. Inger Andersen, addressed the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), a subsidiary body to the UN and the governing body of UNEP, in the midst of the global Coronavirus pandemic that had paralysed the world. Speaking virtually, on 14 July 2020 to the CPR, she identified issues that should be at the core of the Medium-Term Strategy for UNEP during 2022-2025. She said the world was facing a global crisis of historic proportions, which she called the Triple Planetary Crisis of climate, nature, and pollution. Whereas the issues of

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climate, nature, and pollution might have been obvious to discuss, this demonstrates the unique position that UNEP embodies within the UN family – the mandate and ability to combine and synthesise relevant issues to be addressed holistically. Based on solid science and with appropriate governance tools, the nexus themes of the Triple Planetary Crisis soon engaged all UN entities working on environment-related issues and propelled UNEP to a leading position in alerting decision-makers across all segments of society to the interconnectedness of environmental problems. The Triple Planetary Crisis became the way to identify global environmental challenges, analyse issues, and identify solutions for the future.

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Closing Plenary of the sixth session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-6).[51]

3. United Nations Environment Programme

The United Nations Environment Programme[52] (UNEP) is the leading global authority on the environment within the United Nations system, responsible for setting the environmental agenda and supporting countries in addressing ecological challenges. While its work contributes to sustainable development, UNEP's mandate focuses specifically on the environmental dimension of sustainable development rather than the full scope of the 2030 Agenda.

Established following the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment[53] in Stockholm, Sweden (the first global gathering devoted entirely to environmental issues), UNEP was created by the General Assembly to serve as the UN system's environmental conscience and scientific centre. Since then, its mandate has been periodically reaffirmed and strengthened through successive Governing Council and General Assembly decisions, consistently emphasising its role in environmental protection, coordination, and policy guidance. Over time, UNEP has evolved to address emerging challenges, and today its mission

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is often framed through the lens of the Triple Planetary Crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, reflecting on the interconnected environmental pressures shaping global policy and international cooperation.

Headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya, UNEP (alongside UN-Habitat) stands as one of the leading UN entities based in the Global South. This location reflects a deliberate commitment to inclusivity and the integration of developing countries into the centre of decision-making. Over the decades, UNEP has continually expanded its scope to address emerging and interlinked challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the transition to a circular economy. Its evolution demonstrates both institutional resilience and an enduring capacity to adapt to the shifting demands of global governance.

When UNEP was first created, it was overseen by a Governing Council, which was set up by a United Nations decision (General Assembly Resolution 2997) on 15 December 1972. The Governing Council reported its progress to the United Nations General Assembly, which acts as the main decision-making body of the UN, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), a UN Charter body and one of the six main organs of the UN. ECOSOC oversees global issues related to development, health, and the environment and members of the Council are chosen by the General Assembly for four-year terms, following the principle of equitable regional representation to ensure global balance and inclusivity.

The Governing Council was tasked with promoting international cooperation on environmental matters and providing overarching policy guidance for the coordination of environmental activities across the United Nations system. In 1999, the General Assembly further strengthened UNEP's institutional framework by establishing the Global Ministerial Environment Forum[54] (GMEF). The GMEF convened environment ministers from across the world to deliberate on emerging and significant global environmental policy issues, reinforcing UNEP's role as the central convening authority for environmental governance within the UN system.

The UN's primary budget is funded by mandatory assessed contributions from 193 Member States, with each country's share determined by its capacity to pay. This includes contributions to UNEP, though their work is financed primarily through voluntary contributions from Member States, supplemented by earmarked project funding. This reliance on voluntary finance has been a persistent institutional challenge, occasionally leading to disproportionate influence from industrialised donors and uneven regional representation in programme priorities. Nevertheless, UNEP continues to serve as the anchor institution of the global environmental system, coordinating with other UN entities, regional bodies, and stakeholder partners to advance multilateral environmental agreements and environmental governance reform. Although UNEP has developed several well-regarded on-the-ground partnerships, its operational capacity remains significantly limited compared to that of its sister agency, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which maintains an extensive country-level presence. Stakeholders widely recognise UNDP's critical role in supporting countries as they navigate international environmental governance frameworks and implement multilateral environmental

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agreements, particularly through equitable access to technical guidance, capacity-building, and practical planning resources. Furthermore, UNEP lacks the authority to enforce global environmental legislation or to direct environmental strategy across the broader UN system, as its mandate is primarily facilitative and advisory rather than regulatory, leaving it dependent on voluntary cooperation from Member States and other UN agencies to implement its recommendations. Continued and strengthened cooperation between UNEP, UNDP, governments, and stakeholders can improve institutional coherence, reduce fragmentation, and support more evidence-informed and effective environmental governance. It can also help accelerate implementation through joint multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Efforts to strengthen UNEP's authority have been a recurrent theme in international environmental diplomacy. Over the years, proposals ranged from transforming UNEP into a specialised agency to enhancing its coordination role within a broader international environmental governance architecture. The 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) formally decided to establish the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA) in 2013, as UNEP's new universal governing body. The final session of the former Governing Council, also functioning as a Global Ministerial Environment Forum (GMEF), was held in 2013, paving the way for the inaugural UNEA in 2014. With this transition, all 193 UN Member States gained equal participation and decision-making power in shaping global environmental policy, replacing the more limited membership structure of the Governing Council.

Nevertheless, UNEP has achieved notable success in developing and managing international frameworks to address global environmental challenges. The organisation has played a pivotal role in advancing global efforts to regulate toxic pollutants and chemicals, protect the ozone layer, and combat biodiversity loss and climate change. Several landmark agreements and conventions designed to confront these issues were conceived and initiated under UNEP's leadership.

Medium-Term Strategy 2026–2029

The Medium-Term Strategy (MTS) defines UNEP's vision, strategic direction, and operational priorities over a four-year period, translating global environmental commitments into a coherent framework for action that supports the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The UNEP Medium-Term Strategy 2026-2029[55], 'the Strategy', is the organisation's main roadmap for how it plans to help tackle the world's three interconnected environmental crises: climate change, loss of nature and land, and pollution. Developed under decision UNEP/EA.6/L.3, the Medium-Term Strategy (along with its related Programme of Work and Budget for 2026-2027) was created through a collaborative process that included input from Member States, stakeholder groups, and UNEP's Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR). The completed Strategy is scheduled to be presented for approval at the Seventh Session of the UN Environmental Assembly[56] (UNEA7) in December 2025.

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The MTS 2026–2029 articulates a vision of "healthy, prosperous and resilient people and planet". It builds on the foundations of the 2022–2025 Strategy, reaffirming three overarching objectives: Climate Stability, Living in Harmony with Nature, and Towards a Pollution-Free Planet. These objectives are supported by six thematic sub-programmes—Climate Action, Nature Action, Chemicals and Pollution Action, Science-Policy, Environmental Governance, and Finance and Economic Transformations, as described below:

- *Climate Action* - Supports countries in achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement by advancing both mitigation and adaptation measures. It promotes pathways to net-zero emissions through renewable energy deployment, energy efficiency, and low-carbon development strategies. Climate Action also strengthens national adaptation planning, supports climate-resilient infrastructure, and integrates nature-based solutions to enhance community resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate impacts.

- *Nature Action* - Works to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by restoring ecosystems, conserving natural habitats, and promoting sustainable management of land, oceans, and freshwater resources. The sub-programme advances implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework[57] and encourages approaches that link ecosystem health with climate stability, food security, and human well-being. It also promotes community-led conservation and equitable benefit-sharing from natural resources.

- *Chemicals and Pollution Action* - Addresses pollution in all its forms—air, water, soil, and waste—by supporting the sound management of chemicals and the transition to a circular economy. It assists countries in meeting their obligations under global environmental agreements such as the Stockholm, Basel, and Minamata Conventions. Chemicals and Pollution Action also focuses on emerging challenges, including plastic pollution and hazardous waste, promoting cleaner production and waste prevention to safeguard health and ecosystems.

- *Science-Policy* - Strengthens the evidence base for environmental decision-making by providing authoritative assessments, open data, and scientific foresight. It supports global initiatives such as the Global Environment Outlook and enhances policymakers' capacity to apply science-based approaches to governance and planning. The sub-programme promotes collaboration between scientists, policymakers, and stakeholders to ensure that environmental action is informed by the best available knowledge.

- *Environmental Governance* - Enhances institutional, legal, and participatory frameworks for effective environmental management. It supports countries in drafting, implementing, and enforcing environmental laws and policies while promoting multilateral cooperation and stakeholder engagement. Environmental Governance also emphasises transparency, access to information, and environmental justice,

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ensuring that decision-making processes uphold equity, accountability, and the rule of law at all levels.

- *Finance and Economic Transformations* - Seeks to realign financial systems and economic policies with environmental sustainability. It engages governments, businesses, and financial institutions to integrate environmental considerations into fiscal policy, investment decisions, and trade frameworks. The sub-programme promotes green finance, sustainable consumption and production, and inclusive economic models that drive a just transition toward low-carbon and resource-efficient economies.

The Strategy emphasises integration and coherence, ensuring that UNEP's interventions are mutually reinforced across thematic and geographic areas. It promotes science-based policy, the use of environmental data for decision-making, and enhanced coordination among multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). It also strengthens UNEP's role as a knowledge broker and convenor, working across the UN system and with governments, stakeholders, including the private sector, to deliver collective impact.

A central innovation of the 2026–2029 MTS is its strengthened results framework. The Strategy introduces measurable performance indicators and monitoring tools linked to UNEP's Programme of Work, facilitating transparent evaluation of progress and alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also embeds cross-cutting commitments to gender equality, youth engagement, Indigenous knowledge systems, and "leaving no one behind," ensuring that environmental action advances both equity and resilience.

Finally, the Strategy recognises the importance of inclusivity and shared ownership. Its development has involved extensive consultation with Member States and non-state actors, reflecting UNEP's commitment to open and participatory governance. Through the MTS, UNEP seeks not only to accelerate action on the Triple Planetary Crisis, but to deepen the integration of environmental sustainability into the core of global development planning—an evolution consistent with its role as the environmental conscience of the United Nations.

UNEP Leadership, Structure, and the Divisions of UNEP

UNEP is led by an Executive Director and organised through a decentralised structure of six thematic divisions—Policy and Programme, Science, Ecosystems, Economy, Law, and Communication—that together coordinate global efforts to advance environmental sustainability and effective policy implementation. Each division is tasked with implementing specific components of UNEP's Programme of Work, facilitating collaboration across global, regional, and national levels (see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion of UNEP's leadership, governance bodies, and institutional structure).

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- *Policy and Programme Division* – Oversees UNEP's strategic direction by coordinating its global Programme of Work and Medium-Term Strategy, ensuring that all activities align with UN priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and results-based management practices.

- *Science Division* – Acts as UNEP's scientific core, delivering reliable data, assessments, and analysis to guide sound environmental decision-making and bridge the gap between science and policy.

- *Ecosystems Division* – Works to protect, restore, and sustainably manage ecosystems across land, freshwater, and oceans, advancing biodiversity goals and promoting nature-based solutions that strengthen climate resilience and human well-being.

- *Economy Division* – Drives the shift toward greener and more inclusive economies by supporting sustainable production, circular economy approaches, and financial systems that link economic growth with environmental sustainability.

- *Law Division* – Provides expertise in environmental law and governance, helping countries craft and enforce legislation, strengthen institutions, and uphold international environmental commitments and justice.

- *Communication Division* – Leads UNEP's global communications, campaigns, and outreach to raise awareness, mobilise action, and make environmental science and policy accessible to people and institutions worldwide.

UNEP's regional offices—in Africa[58], Asia and the Pacific[59], Europe[60], Latin America and the Caribbean[61], North America[62], and West Asia[63]—act as key channels for engagement with Member States and regional institutions. This regional architecture enhances responsiveness to local environmental challenges while ensuring coherence with global priorities set by the UN Environment Assembly.

UNEP Civil Society Unit (Major Groups and Stakeholders) Engagement

Through the UNEP Civil Society Unit[64] (the Unit), UNEP facilitates structured engagement with civil society organisations and the nine Major Groups, which were identified in Agenda 21 as specific stakeholder categories recognised by UNEA. These nine Major Groups are Non-Governmental Organisations[65], Women[66], Children and Youth[67], Indigenous Peoples[68], Local Authorities[69], Farmers[70], Scientific and Technological Community[71], Workers and Trade Unions[72], and Business and Industry[73]. Each Major Group has two representatives, resulting in a total of 18 members on the Major Groups Facilitating Committee (MGFP). The MGFC is further supported by two elected from each of UNEP's six regions.

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In addition to these nine Major Groups, other stakeholder categories, Persons with Disabilities[74], Volunteers[75], Ageing[76], and Education and Academia[77], engage specifically through the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) and do not participate directly in UNEP's Major Groups framework.

The Unit plays a vital role in fostering transparency, inclusivity, and accountability within UNEP's governance processes. It coordinates accreditation for stakeholder participation in UNEA and its subsidiary meetings, provides capacity-building and information-sharing platforms, and ensures that stakeholder perspectives inform UNEP's policy formulation and implementation.

By integrating non-state actors into decision-making, UNEP recognises that environmental solutions must be co-created with those most affected by ecological degradation and those with the capacity to drive change at community and industry levels. The Civil Society Unit also administers the Major Groups Facilitating Committee (MGFC)[78], which serves as a formal consultative body representing stakeholder constituencies.

Major Groups Facilitating Committee

The Major Groups Facilitating Committee[79] (MGFC) was created to enhance communication and collaboration between the nine Major Groups identified in Agenda 21 and UNEP's governing bodies. Comprised of elected representatives from each Major Group, the MGFC serves as a bridge to coordinate consultations, share information, and support collective advocacy on priority environmental policy issues. It helps ensure that the voices of diverse stakeholders are effectively represented in UNEP's decision-making processes.

The MGFC provides structured input into UNEA resolutions, policy statements, and multi-stakeholder dialogues. It plays a key role in bringing grassroots perspectives to global discussions, identifying emerging environmental issues, and strengthening the inclusiveness and transparency of UNEP's processes. By formalising stakeholder representation, UNEP has created a mechanism for meaningful participation by non-state actors in environmental governance.

Through regular meetings, digital consultations, and regional coordination, the MGFC exemplifies a participatory model of multilateral environmental governance. It reflects UNEP's commitment to inclusive engagement as a cornerstone for building public trust and supporting the transformational objectives outlined in the Medium-Term Strategy and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

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World leaders meeting at the 'Earth Summit' in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 13 June 1992.[80]

4. Concepts for Sustainable Development Governance

This section outlines key concepts and guiding principles that shape global environmental and sustainable development governance. Many of these principles originate from the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which articulated 27 foundational principles for achieving sustainable development worldwide. These ideas build upon earlier milestones, including the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and the 1987 Brundtland Commission's landmark definition of sustainable development:

> *"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."*

The following section highlights several of the most influential principles from the Rio Declaration that continue to underpin international environmental and sustainable development policy as well as governance today.

The Precautionary Principle

The precautionary principle, articulated as Principle 15 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, established a key foundation for global environmental governance and sustainable development. It states:

"In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation."

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The precautionary principle holds that a lack of complete scientific certainty should not delay action to prevent potential environmental harm. In other words, it shifts the burden of proof: rather than requiring conclusive evidence of damage before taking protective measures, it calls on science and policymakers to demonstrate that an activity does *not* pose a threat before allowing it to proceed. If such certainty cannot be established, governments and the international community are expected to act as though a risk exists.

The principle carries important implications for human rights. It suggests that communities whose well-being and livelihoods depend on healthy ecosystems have a right to have those systems protected as a matter of course. The absence of scientific proof that an environment is in danger should not invalidate a community's right to safeguard the natural systems that sustain them.

While the precautionary principle appears in numerous international agreements and national laws, it lacks a universally accepted definition or application. A study by Stewart (2002) identified 14 variations of the principle, which can be broadly grouped into four core interpretations:

- *Non-Preclusion Principle:* Scientific uncertainty should not automatically prevent regulation of activities that may cause serious harm.
- *Margin of Safety Principle:* Regulations should incorporate a safety buffer by limiting activities to levels well below those expected to cause harm.
- *Best Available Technology (BAT) Principle:* Activities with uncertain but potentially serious risks should use the best available technology to minimise harm unless proven otherwise.
- *Prohibition Principle:* Activities with uncertain but potentially serious risks should be prohibited unless demonstrated to pose no significant threat.

For the precautionary principle to function effectively, a balance must be found between scientific evidence and policy action. Policymakers often require solid data before investing political capital in new environmental measures, making proactive regulation difficult. Critics also argue that applying the principle too broadly could be impractical or costly, as countless human activities carry some degree of environmental uncertainty.

Nevertheless, in theory, the precautionary principle offers a powerful framework for protecting fragile ecosystems and the communities that depend on them—if applied consistently and supported by political will and practical mechanisms for enforcement.

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The ‘Polluter Pays’ Principle

The polluter pays principle, outlined in Principle 16 of the Rio Declaration, establishes that those responsible for pollution should bear the costs of preventing and managing environmental damage. It encourages governments to integrate environmental costs into economic decision-making and to use financial and regulatory tools that hold polluters accountable—while safeguarding the public interest and avoiding unfair impacts on trade or investment.

The concept first appeared at the international level in a 1972 OECD Council Recommendation on Guiding Principles Concerning International Economic Aspects of Environmental Policies[81]. The recommendation stated that assigning the costs of pollution control to the polluter would promote the efficient use of environmental resources and prevent trade distortions. It further clarified that polluters should cover the expenses required to maintain environmental quality at an acceptable level, as determined by public authorities.

The ‘polluter pays’ principle, Principle 16, of the Rio Declaration reads:

“National authorities should endeavour to promote the internalisation of environmental costs and the use of economic instruments, taking into account the approach that the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution, with due regard to the public interest and without distorting international trade and investment.”

This principle seeks to ensure that any party who causes environmental pollution is held responsible for paying the costs for the environmental damage done. On an international level, it has wide-reaching implications for the respective responsibilities of nation-states in addressing global environmental problems. In the context of climate change negotiations, it is often invoked by some to argue that historically high-emitting states should take the lead in tackling climate change and incurring the costs of responding to its impacts. The principle also provides a rationale for the establishment of regulatory frameworks for tax and other measures which integrate ‘environmental externalities’ into the costs of products and activities. It is suggested that there would be a strong incentive to invest in more sustainable models of production by making environmentally damaging activities more costly.

There are several challenges to the implementation of the ‘polluter pays’ principle. Firstly, on a global level, it can be difficult to establish the respective responsibilities of different states, for example, in the climate change context, due to the complex issues related to attribution of causality. There may also be a historic dimension to environmental degradation – whilst some states engage in activities today that are highly environmentally damaging, their historic contribution to environmental pollution may have been insignificant. On a national level, it is also challenging to implement the principle with consistency, as the potential impact on particular key industries may be too dramatic to be politically feasible. There are also some significant challenges around equity – even if applied consistently, the principle in theory could

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be seen as allowing those with greater financial resources to buy their way out of regulation, whilst those with more modest means are forced to make sacrifices.

Debates around the polluter pays principle remain central to contemporary environmental policy. The concept has underpinned arguments for the creation of the Loss and Damage Fund, established at COP 27 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt (2022), which calls for wealthier nations to support countries in the Global South that are disproportionately affected by climate impacts.

In recent years, attention has also turned to the valuation of ecosystems—recognising the economic worth of the goods and services nature provides, such as clean water, carbon storage, and pollination. This approach represents an evolution of the polluter pays principle, extending it to account for the hidden costs of environmental degradation. A landmark study by UNEP and partners, *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB)*, highlighted that many of the world's largest and most profitable companies would face significant financial challenges if the true value of ecosystem services were fully reflected in their operating costs.

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities

The origins of the term 'common but differentiated responsibilities' can be traced back to the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. However, it was not until 1992 during UNCED that the phrase became 'formally enunciated as a principle' and assumed an integral part of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. Principle 7 states:

> *"In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command."*

This principle underscores the responsibility of each nation to contribute to addressing environmental and sustainable development challenges that cross national borders and cannot be solved by any one country alone. The level of responsibility varies depending on a nation's economic strength, technological capacity, and historical role in contributing to environmental degradation.

The concept was subsequently enshrined in the UNFCCC, which emphasises that climate change is a 'common concern of humankind'. However, it also recognises the legitimate need and right of developing countries to pursue economic growth in a sustainable manner and in a way that is consistent with the goal of reducing poverty. It also stipulates that developed countries must lead the way in climate change mitigation, requiring them to display how they are assisting developing countries to meet their obligations through the transfer of finance and technology, as well as meeting their own commitments and targets.

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The principle of common but differentiated responsibility became a cornerstone of international climate negotiations, guiding the work of the UNFCCC Conferences of the Parties (COPs) and formally incorporated into the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Though the principle had taken centre stage during earlier climate change negotiations, this was the first time the concept was included in a legally binding international agreement. The principle continues to be invoked through the UNFCCC to suggest that nation-states that have historically been responsible for carbon emissions should commit greater resources to climate change mitigation and adaptation globally. However, it is also increasingly interpreted to apply to the current circumstances of nation-states, thereby bestowing responsibility upon economies in transition.

Common but Differentiated Governance (CBDG)

Inspired by the principle of CBDR, an often-cited publication[82] suggested a similar principle for sustainability governance: We have common goals that are universal but circumstances (administrative, ecological, social, economic, as well as with regard to culture and traditions - what works where and why?) mean that there are no one-size fits all solutions, and so-called 'best practices' are rare. Successful practices in one country often need to be adapted to work in another country. If this is not done, governance failure can undermine the implementation of any policy, law, or strategy. This not only applies to sustainable development but also to environmental sustainability. How this can work for the SDGs, creating situational mixtures of three typical governance styles – hierarchical (top-down/legal), network (collaborative) and market (using market tools) - that differ in 50 features, was elaborated in 'Metagovernance for Sustainability.'[83]

Access to Information, Participation, and Justice

The principle of access to information, participation and justice in environmental decision-making, Principle 10, states:

> *"Environmental issues are best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level. At the national level, each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, including information on hazardous materials and activities in their communities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. States shall facilitate and encourage public awareness and participation by making information widely available. Effective access to judicial and administrative proceedings, including redress and remedy, shall be provided."*

Principle 10 introduces accountability, transparency, and democratic empowerment into decision-making on environmental matters. Through having access to information about environmental impacts, greater transparency is brought to the environmental decision-making process. Through access to participation, citizens can actively engage with decision-

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making through consultations and dialogue and make constructive proposals so that planning and legislation better reflect their needs. Through access to justice, citizens have access to redress and remedy, to protect their access to information and participation and to challenge decisions that do not take their needs into account.[84]

Principle 10 is unevenly implemented globally, and in some cases, where laws exist, mechanisms to impart comprehensive environmental information to the public may still be lacking. In many developed countries, there has been an improvement in laws to grant citizens greater access to information, and a commitment to better engagement, consultation and participation in environmental matters. In practice, however, many of these laws exist on paper only. Efforts to enhance participation in decision-making in some cases are often top-down affairs that take place towards the end of a decision-making process, where the capacity to influence the outcome has been minimised. Additionally, access to justice remains constrained by 'obstacles of cost, lack of clarity about procedures for appeal, and also the lack of standing as a legally recognised party with a legitimate interest in the case'.[85]

One of the most comprehensive efforts to implement Principle 10 is the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Participation in Decision-making, and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, also called the Aarhus Convention after the city in Denmark where it was adopted in 1998. UNECE negotiated the Convention as a regional convention to be signed and ratified by countries, mainly in Europe and Central Asia, that fall under its remit. The Convention was referred to by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as the 'most ambitious ventures around environmental democracy so far undertaken under the auspices of the United Nations'. 60 Building on the inspiration provided by the Aarhus Convention, the Escazú Agreement, adopted in March 2018, was the first environmental treaty of Latin America and the Caribbean and the only one to emerge directly from the Rio+20 process, further advancing Principle 10 in a new regional context.

At the UNEP Governing Council in 2010, a series of guidelines were approved for the development of national legislation on access to information, public participation and justice on environmental matters.[86] While these guidelines draw heavily on the Aarhus Convention, they remain non-binding, so there is no process for reporting, monitoring or review. To address this issue, the World Resources Institute and the Access Initiative have launched a campaign towards the UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 to make the case for regional conventions on environmental access rights.[87] It is argued that the regional approach is the most likely to lead to success; whilst the Aarhus Convention does allow for the accession of non-UNECE states, any new members must be approved by the Conference of the Parties of the Convention, which creates political difficulties as the Convention is widely viewed to be 'Europe-centric'. Regional negotiation facilitates more regional ownership over the process and can overcome cultural and language barriers that are more prevalent on a global level. Importantly, it can also prevent the watering down of legislation to the lowest common denominator, which can sometimes be a challenge for global negotiations. The ambition is for

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the Rio+20 outcome document to call for the setting in motion of regional time-bound negotiations, overseen by the appropriate regional bodies.

Global Public Goods/The Global Commons

Environmental goods and services, such as the global oceans and the Earth's atmosphere, are referred to as the 'global commons' or 'global public goods.' A public good of this kind is non-rival and non-excludable. This means that consumption or use of the good (e.g. the air we breathe) by one individual does not reduce the availability of that good to another.

The Tragedy of the Commons

In 1968, Garrett Hardin coined the term 'The Tragedy of the Commons'. This notion relates to the activity of people who are sharing public goods or a common resource without one being responsible for the management of the resource. According to Hardin, self-interested behaviour in relation to the sharing of a public or common resource can result in its mismanagement and degradation, unless someone has the authority to enforce rules and regulations that are in the interest of all concerned. A prominent example of the tragedy of the commons is in relation to instances of transboundary or atmospheric pollution.

During the negotiation of international laws such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea[88] in the 1970s and 1980s, there appeared to be enthusiasm to agree to govern the resources and goods of the global commons by a principle known as 'the common heritage of humankind'. Common heritage resources have been defined as 'those [resources that] are owned by all nations, not one; that are managed multilaterally, not unilaterally, with the benefits of that management shared by all; and are used for peaceful purposes only'.[89] However, the lack of agreement on using the principle of 'the common heritage of mankind' and the noticeable absence of the principle in international law and MEAs illustrate that the concept of a common heritage has not been approved or widely accepted by many states.

In place of the common heritage principle, there is a similar, but arguably less effective, concept of 'the common concern of humankind'. The 'concern' relates to the human interest in preserving the planetary goods and resources and in maintaining and protecting the global commons. Two important MEAs that address these concerns are the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. 'Unlike the common heritage concept, common concern does not imply legal obligations, but it does signify the openness of the international community to regulate resources that would otherwise be strictly within the control of the sovereign nations.'[90]

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International Governance of the Global Commons

There is a distinction between global commons goods, or public goods, and private goods. Adam Smith, an early champion of free entrepreneurship, is understood to have presupposed a healthy balance between public and private goods.[91] However, it has been argued that globalisation has destroyed 32 such a balance and that markets nowadays work worldwide, while the institutions and laws that generate, safeguard and control public goods have remained essentially national.[92] Thus, it is understood that the case for stronger international governance of public and common goods should exist to enhance and rebalance the harmony of the relationship between private and public goods. As such, proponents of strengthening the governance of the global commons are keen to protect the kind of public goods that are 'vulnerable' to 'destructive cherry picking on the part of private investors.'[93]

Propositions have been made for the creation of a Global Environment Organisation (GEO) to focus specifically on environmental issues that are global in scope, such as transboundary atmospheric pollution and management of shared natural resources—the so-called "global commons."[94] They distinguish these from "world" environmental issues, which affect all countries but do not necessarily require coordinated global responses, such as localised water pollution or land-use practices. While this distinction can help clarify the potential remit of a GEO and the roles of nation-states relative to international institutions, it is inherently ambiguous. For example, forests might be classified as "global" because of their impact on greenhouse gas emissions, whereas land management is often considered a national or local concern. In reality, land-use changes can have major consequences for ecosystems, biodiversity, and carbon emissions, all of which have global effects. This complexity has been acknowledged in international policy through the UNFCCC's specific work programme on land use, land-use change, and forestry.

Intergenerational Equity

As has already been noted, the 1987 Brundtland Report's definition of sustainable development explicitly enshrines recognition of the responsibility one generation has to subsequent generations.[95]

This broad sustainable development paradigm raises interesting questions about how societies can deliver an equal range of development choices to both present and future generations, and what form or direction development should take if it is to be sustainable. The Report also emphasised that many environmental problems result from disparities in economic and political power. Another influential study, the 1991 report Caring for the Earth[96], emphasised the importance of maintaining development within the earth's carrying capacity, that is, within the limits of the renewal and recycling processes which enable the biosphere to provide renewable resources, assimilate wastes and provide other environmental goods and services. This concept remains central to the current understanding of sustainable development.

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A development that furthered this concept focused on nine planetary boundaries that made up the carrying capacity of the earth and detailed the 'safe operating space for humanity'.[97] Planetary boundaries science offered a conceptual framework that underpinned the need for development to be inherently sustainable if humanity was to remain within this 'safe operating space'. This concept gained attention during the preparatory meetings for Rio+20, and a discussion paper was published that argued for recognition of a 'social floor' and a commitment not to fall below it, thus defining a 'doughnut' space that humanity must live within.[98] Successfully developing in a sustainable and equitable way, coupled with living within the planetary boundaries and above the social floor, went a long way toward putting the principle of intergenerational equity into practice.[99]

Sustainable development broadly requires that the well-being of the present generation should not be increased at the expense of the welfare of future generations, and that society's well-being should not decline over time. The next generation can only produce as much well-being as the present one if it has the same stock of capital available to it. To put it in simple terms, sustainability implies 'living off the interest', rather than 'living off the capital'. The capital stock can be thought of as comprising three types of capital:

- Natural capital, such as forests, air, water, soils and biodiversity (normally referred to as environmental resources), and other resources such as minerals and aggregates;
- Human capital, such as human resources, skills, and knowledge;
- Human-made capital, such as manufactured capital and goods, machinery, infrastructure, buildings, and other forms of physical plant.

Sustainability, therefore, requires that, at a minimum, a country should maintain a constant stock of aggregate capital over time. The choice it makes about the composition of the constant capital stock to be maintained will determine whether it is on a path towards:

- Weak sustainability, where it substitutes natural capital with human, or human-made, capital (e.g., it depletes half of its primary forests to build factories or tourist resorts); or
- Strong sustainability, where it does not substitute natural capital with other forms (e.g. it conserves a permanent estate of primary forest).

For renewable resources (e.g., fish, forests, water) and sinks for wastes (e.g. the atmosphere) to be used at sustainable levels, the rate of harvesting them (or discharge of emissions) must not exceed their rate of regeneration or assimilative capacity. Non-renewable natural resources such as minerals do not regenerate, and in their case, sustainability becomes a question of maintaining utility over time, either by expanding reserves (through recycling, efficiency gains and exploration), or by investing income surpluses in alternative resources that will be available for future generations.

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Decisions need to be made by society about the acceptable limits of substitution between natural, human and human-made capital. This requires an estimate of the critical minimum natural capital (or types of natural capital) that is needed to ensure the survival of ecosystems and the biosphere. Such an estimate is very difficult to achieve because of the degree of uncertainty in our understanding of the biosphere's complex, dynamic and interrelated processes. Uncertainty is endemic to environmental science and makes sustainability, in practice, imprecise. For this reason, environmentalists have increasingly advocated the precautionary principle (see above), which urges decision-making to err on the side of caution, even when all the scientific facts are not fully known, to ensure that sustainability limits are not breached. The choices and risks that are inherent in this process need to be negotiated and agreed upon within countries, and also between countries in the case of global commons and global public goods. The process of negotiation and decision-making, it is argued, requires effective capabilities in governance, policy, science and technology, and the interface between them:

- A governance capacity: to enable countries, through open and participatory processes, to agree sustainable development goals and the trade-off between weak and strong sustainability; address issues of environmental risk; agree and effectively implement policies to steer development along a sustainable path; and collaborate regionally and internationally on the management of global commons.

- A scientific and technological capacity: to determine carrying capacities and indicators; set baselines and suggest precautionary limits; monitor environmental changes; deepen understanding of environmental processes (at local and global levels); and develop or adapt technologies to ensure that development takes place within environmental limits.

For the well-being of future generations to be reflected in institutional arrangements, several governmental and non-governmental actors promote the establishment of a national commissioner, ombudsman, or 'guardian' for future generations. The role of such a position is to monitor and review actions across all government departments to evaluate the extent to which decisions are being made in the long-term interest, and thereby to assess the impact on future generations. This has been put into practice by Hungary, whose Parliament has appointed a Commissioner for Future Generations.[100]

Environmental Integration & Policy Coherence

The environmental integration principle, which aims to incorporate environmental considerations into policies and regulatory instruments in fields outside environmental policy and law, initially emerged and evolved in International and subsequently in EU Law. Since its emergence, the environmental integration principle has been closely linked to the concept of sustainable development, given that the principle is perceived as a key instrument for its realisation.

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The principle was reinvigorated when it became part of the SDG target 17.14 on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development (PCSD), as an elaboration of the existing principle of Policy Coherence for Development (PCD). PCD focused on the coherence within development cooperation. With the universality of the SDGs, it is now focused on the domestic as well as international policy of all countries.

UNEP is the custodian agency for the PCSD indicator 17.14.1. This is a composite indicator with eight sub-indicators, mostly about governance aspects (e.g. horizontal coordination between ministries; vertical coordination between levels of administration; and coordination with stakeholders). The OECD[101] has supported countries (also non-OECD; one project was with the African Peer Review Mechanism - APRM) during the past years in setting up PCSD action plans. UNEP published a handbook[102] on how to use the indicator.

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Source: UNEP Environment Assembly[103]

5. Global Institutions for Sustainable Development Governance

Sustainable development governance refers to the systems, institutions, and decision-making processes that guide and coordinate actions across governments, sectors, and stakeholders to achieve balanced economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection for present and future generations.

Sustainable Development Governance

The UN General Assembly

The UN General Assembly[104] serves as the main decision-making and representative body of the United Nations, responsible for debate, policy formulation, and collective action on global issues. Accordingly, the General Assembly provides a global forum for multilateral dialogue on the wide range of issues addressed by the UN Charter. While the Charter does not explicitly

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mention the environment or sustainable development, these themes fall within the Assembly's broader mandate to initiate studies and make recommendations that foster international cooperation in economic, social, cultural, educational, and health matters. In addition, the General Assembly, often guided by the agenda-setting role of the UN Secretary-General, shapes global priorities by elevating emerging issues and directing international attention and action toward them.

A number of resolutions have been adopted by the General Assembly, which reaffirm the interconnected nature of social, economic, and environmental development, with some of the main highlights including the following declarations from major summits on sustainable development:

1. The UN Conference on Environment and Development[105] (UNCED) in 1992
2. Rio+5[106] (Earth Summit) in 1997
3. Millennium Declaration[107] in 2000,
4. World Summit on Sustainable Development[108] in 2002
5. Rio+20[109] in 2012
6. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[110], including the SDGs in 2015.

Through these resolutions, sustainable development has been firmly integrated into the UN's agenda. The General Assembly addresses sustainable development not only by setting international standards and drafting guidelines, but also by supporting the implementation of measures and policies adopted by member states.[111] It liaises with all other UN bodies to achieve improved coordination of UN activities on sustainable development-related issues.

As the main representative body of the UN, the General Assembly is composed of 193 Member States, each allowed one vote. It operates through six main committees and subsidiary bodies, including the Second Committee (Economic and Financial), which deals directly with sustainable development and environmental issues. They provide overall policy guidance to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and UN system entities on sustainable development.

The Second Committee of the General Assembly

The Second Committee, or the Economic and Financial Committee (ECOFIN)[112], is a committee within the United Nations that addresses issues in the areas of global finance and economics, including issues relating to international trade, financing for development, sustainable development and poverty eradication. Although the Second Committee is mainly concerned with macroeconomic issues, a large part of its work focuses on development and sovereignty over natural resources. Indeed, it deals with issues relating to country groupings with special circumstances, such as the least developed countries, regarding natural resources. Furthermore, the Second Committee is responsible for coordinating the implementation and follow-up to several conferences and programmes on sustainable development and global poverty, such as the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty[113], the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, and Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development.

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The Economic and Social Council

The Economic and Social Council[114] (ECOSOC) is composed of 54 UN member states, elected by the General Assembly. Its role is to coordinate and strengthen UN activities in economic, social, and related fields, ensuring that sustainable development—including environmental considerations—is integrated across UN policies and programs. ECOSOC also conducts studies, publishes reports on international issues such as health, education, and sustainable development, and makes recommendations to the General Assembly, member states, and specialised agencies. By providing a platform for policy formulation and coordination, ECOSOC serves as a key body for promoting coherent and comprehensive approaches to sustainable development across the UN system.

UN Conference on Trade and Development

The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), in collaboration with UNEP and UNDESA, has contributed to several initiatives aimed at integrating sustainable development into trade and economic governance. Key contributions include:

1. Developing a vulnerability index to support quantitative and analytical work on the vulnerability of small island developing states (1998), alongside a review of voluntary industry initiatives.
2. Establishing UN guidelines on consumer protection, incorporating sustainable consumption, and launching an open-ended consultation process on oceans and seas under the UN General Assembly (1999).
3. Creating a new permanent body, the UN Forum on Forests, to strengthen international coordination on forest governance.[115]

UN Environment Organisation

Proposals to strengthen UNEP by upgrading it to a specialised agency, institution, or World Environment Organisation (WEO) have been under discussion at the intergovernmental level for over two decades. These proposals aim to provide UNEP with greater authority, predictable funding, and an elevated role in the international environmental governance hierarchy, reflecting similar ambitions to establish a WEO or a Global Parliament for the Environment.

Environmental Management Group

The Environmental Management Group[116] (EMG) is an inter-agency coordination mechanism for environmental issues across the UN system. It was established in 2001, following General Assembly Resolution 53/242, which endorsed the Secretary-General's proposal to strengthen cooperation on environment and human settlements.

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The primary goal of the EMG is to address inefficiencies and overlaps within the international environmental governance architecture.[117] Enhancing system-wide coherence has become increasingly critical as the growing number of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), institutions, and processes has contributed to the fragmentation of environmental governance.[118] The EMG's membership includes UN specialised agencies, programmes, and organs, along with the secretariats of MEAs. The group is chaired by the Executive Director of UNEP.[119]

The EMG facilitates and supports a variety of UN consultative processes designed to improve understanding and coordination in environmental governance. It was invited by the Governing Council of UNEP to assist the Consultative Group of Ministers and High-level Representatives in their work on reforming the broader international environmental governance system.[120]

Beyond its system-wide coordination role, the EMG also contributes to mainstreaming environmental considerations at the national level through operational support. By helping countries develop coherent national frameworks to fulfil their multilateral environmental obligations, the EMG strengthens both international cooperation and national environmental governance practices.

The World Trade Organisation

As part of the economic pillar of sustainable development, it has been widely acknowledged that the global sustainable development framework holds limited authority over economic governance. This domain remains largely influenced by powerful intergovernmental groups such as the G8, G20, Major Economies Forum (MEF), and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). While global summits on sustainable development have produced aspirational outcome documents, meaningful progress toward these commitments remains constrained without broader reform across these economic systems. Conflicts have often arisen between legally binding environmental obligations and WTO trade rules, while many of the principles set out in the 1992 Rio Declaration remain at odds with a global financial system that, even after the financial crisis, operates with limited regulation.

The World Trade Organisation serves as the primary international institution for negotiating and regulating global trade, with a mandate to promote free trade and stimulate economic growth. However, the WTO has often faced criticism for failing to adequately integrate environmental policies into its trade framework. Critics argue that the environmental and social consequences of trade and labour movements are frequently overlooked and that the WTO's structure and mandate are ill-equipped to incorporate the environmental dimensions of trade. Some have even suggested the creation of a new international institution dedicated to ensuring that trade and environmental agreements are mutually supportive.

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Committee on Trade and Environment

Within the WTO, the Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE) serves as a key forum for examining the intersection of trade and environmental policy. In preparation for the 2003 CTE Special Session, several multilateral environmental agreement (MEA) secretariats were granted *ad hoc* invitee status, allowing them to contribute directly to WTO deliberations. UNEP played a facilitative role in these dialogues, helping to strengthen collaboration between the CTE and environmental bodies, to ensure that considerations on issues relating to the environment and sustainable development could meaningfully inform WTO negotiations.[121]

In July 2006, however, the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations was suspended for six months, exposing persistent tensions within the WTO system. Since then, the CTE has continued to meet in Special Session formats, focusing on the Doha Development Agenda, particularly paragraph 31(i), which addresses the relationship between WTO rules and trade obligations in multilateral environmental agreements. Despite ongoing discussions, the WTO Director-General has urged that the Doha negotiations must be "taken up to a higher gear" if sustainable development is to be fully integrated into global trade processes.[122]

The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

The High-level Political Forum (HLPF)[123] was established by the Rio+20 outcome document, The Future We Want, agreed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012. The mandate and goals of the HLPF are to conduct in-depth reviews of progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[124], which include Voluntary National Reviews[125] where countries present the findings from national reviews of progress with a view to accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

While the HLPF meets every year to track progress on the SDGs, once every four years it holds a special, high-level session called the SDG Summit[126]. This summit, organised under the UN General Assembly, brings together Heads of State and Government to review global progress and set priorities for the years ahead. The SDG Summit serves as a major global checkpoint, providing an opportunity for world leaders to take stock of progress toward the implementation of the SDGs, assess challenges, and set priorities for the next phase of implementation. The next SDG Summit is scheduled for September 2027, continuing the tradition of four-yearly reviews that complement the HLPF's annual work. The first SDG Summit[127] was held in September 2019, while the second SDG Summit[128], in September 2023, adopted the 2023 Political Declaration[129].

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Themes for the HLPF

2025		
Goal	**Target**	**Indicator**
Good Health and Well-Being (Goal 3)	3.2: By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under-5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least 25 per 1,000 live births[1]	3.2.1: Under-5 mortality rate[1]
Gender Equality (Goal 5)	5.5: Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life[2]	5.5.1: Proportion of seats held by women in (a) national parliaments and (b) local governments[2]
Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8)	8.5: By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value[3]	8.5.2: Unemployment rate, by sex, age, and persons with disabilities[3]
Life Below Water (Goal 14)	14.4: By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end over-fishing, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; restore fish stocks to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield[3]	14.4.1: Proportion of fish stocks within biologically sustainable levels[3]

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Partnerships for the Goals (Goal 17)	17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public–private, and civil society partnerships[3]	17.17.1: Amount in US dollars committed to public–private partnerships for infrastructure[3]
2026		
Goal	**Target**	**Indicator**
Clean Water and Sanitation (Goal 6)	6.1: By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all[1]	6.1.1: Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services[3]
Affordable and Clean Energy (Goal 7)	7.1: By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable, and modern energy services[4]	7.1.2: Proportion of population with primary reliance on clean fuels and technology[4]
Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (Goal 9)	9.5: By 2030, enhance scientific research and upgrade technological capabilities of industrial sectors, including for developing countries[4]	9.5.1: Research and development expenditure as a proportion of GDP[4]
Sustainable Cities and Communities (Goal 11)	11.6: By 2030, reduce the adverse per-capita environmental impact of cities, including air quality and municipal waste management[4]	11.6.2: Annual mean levels of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in cities[4]
Partnerships for the Goals (Goal 17)	17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships[3]	17.16.1: Number of countries reporting progress in multi-stakeholder development effectiveness monitoring frameworks[3]
2027		

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Goal	Target	Indicator
Quality Education (Goal 4)	4.1: By 2030, ensure all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education[4]	4.1.1: Proportion of children and young people achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics[4]
Reduced Inequalities (Goal 10)	10.2: By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or other status[4]	10.2.1: Proportion of people living below 50 % of median income, by age, sex, and persons with disabilities[4]
Responsible Consumption and Production (Goal 12)	12.2: By 2030, achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources[4]	12.2.1: Material footprint, material footprint per capita, and material footprint per GDP[4]

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The next SDG Summit will be held in September 2027, convened under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, bringing together ministers and senior officials to assess progress on the SDGs and guide implementation efforts.

The Division for Sustainable Development Goals

The Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) operates under the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)[130] and serves as the secretariat to the HLPF. They provide substantive support and coordination for the function of HLPF through the preparation of analytical inputs, policy briefs, and progress reports (including the Global Sustainable Development Report[131]). They also coordinate with voluntary national reviews (VNRs)[132] that countries present to the forum.

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Beyond supporting the HLPF, the DSDG also works across the UN system to integrate the SDGs into policies, planning, and programmes, ensuring cohesion amongst agencies, funds, and programmes. In essence, the HLPF provides the political and intergovernmental platform, while the DSDG is the technical and organisational backbone of the production, ensuring SDGs are monitored, reviewed, and mainstreamed throughout the UN system.

UN Sustainable Development Group

The UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG)[133] aims to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global, regional, and country levels. This agency ensures that the UN delivers as one, prioritising a unified framework of system-wide guidance, standards, and accountability for planning and results reporting on sustainable development.

It is chaired by the UN Deputy Secretary General and chaired operationally by the Administrator of the UN Development Programme (UNDP). UNSDG brings together heads of UN entities to coordinate policies, strategies, and operations that support the SDGs. The UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) serves as the secretariat of the UNSDG.

Inter-Agency and Expert Group of SDG Indicators

The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs)[134] was created in March 2015 at the 46th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission, which was composed of Member States and regional and international agencies as observers. The IAEG-SDGs was tasked to develop and implement the global indicator framework for the Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. IAEG-SDGs developed this framework, and it was agreed upon two years later at the 48th session of the UN Statistical Commission in March 2017.

The annual work programme, agreed by the UN Statistical Commission each year in March, focuses on the implementation of the indicator framework. The group's work involves keeping track of how the methods and definitions for measuring the SDGs are updated and improved. It also focuses on making sure data is broken down to show differences between groups (e.g., by gender, age, or location), managing three smaller teams that focus on specific technical areas, and helping countries share what they have learned about tracking progress toward the SDGs.

The IAEG-SDGs has working groups that focus on two principal areas: how countries share and manage SDG data, and how maps and location-based information are used to track progress. Another team has been set up to collect lessons learned from several years of SDG monitoring. Each group and team sets its own work plan and methods, decides how to coordinate with partners, and reports on its progress during IAEG-SDGs meetings. Participation is open not only to member countries but also to other interested governments, international organisations, researchers, and Major Group representatives who meet the group's participation criteria.

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Source: UN Shutterfly photo[135]

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.

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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]

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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 10members. 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

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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 unsuitable 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.

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- **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

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- 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 Initiative[161], 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

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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).

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- 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,

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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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Hon. Ann Waiguru, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary for Devolution and Planning and Mr. Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General, United Nations, officially opened the Pavilion.[183]

7. Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships Around Delivering Action on the Triple Planetary Crisis

Key Milestones on the Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Journey

1992 – Earth Summit (Agenda 21)

- Broadening the formal understanding of the global NGO community of organisations at the UN, Agenda 21 formally recognised Nine Major Groups of this community and set out their rights and responsibilities in sustainable development.

1993 – Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)

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- The CSD was created to monitor Agenda 21 implementation and established an annual review process that enabled all nine Major Groups to engage directly and to report their own progress to the UN.

1993 – UNEP Adopts the Nine Major Groups Framework

- UNEP incorporated the Major Groups structure into its deliberations, ensuring their participation in environmental governance.

1995–1996 – CSD Stakeholder Implementation Days

- The CSD organised dedicated sessions for each stakeholder group to present their implementation efforts, progress, and challenges.

1995 – UNFCCC Expands Stakeholder Participation

- The UNFCCC began opening its processes to the nine Major Groups; the last constituency was formally recognised in 2011.

1995 – CBD and UNCCD COPs Enable New Constituency Recognition

- Both Conventions agreed that future Conferences of the Parties could decide on the recognition of additional stakeholder constituencies.

1996 – Habitat II

- Negotiations in Committee I were complemented by Committee II, where each stakeholder group presented its vision for implementing the Habitat II Agenda and identified partnership opportunities.

1997–2004 – CSD Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues

- The CSD convened formal two-day dialogues each year, bringing stakeholders and Member States together for structured discussions on priority issues.

2002 – The Bali Guiding Principles for Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

- The Bali principles laid the foundation for the design and operation of effective partnerships.

2002 – World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)

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- WSSD launched a major wave of voluntary, non-negotiated multi-stakeholder partnerships and commitments by governments, business, and stakeholders to support sustainable development implementation.

2003 – G7 Begins Stakeholder Engagement

- The G7 initiated processes to engage with a wider range of stakeholder constituencies.

2006 – Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM)

- SAICM emerged from WSSD as a multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral platform for the sound management of chemicals across their lifecycle.

2008 – ECOSOC Partnership Forum Established

- The annual ECOSOC Partnership Forum became a central venue for showcasing partnerships and discussing their challenges and opportunities.

2009 – Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Reform

- The CFS was fundamentally restructured to formally include stakeholder participation in policy deliberation and multi-stakeholder implementation planning.

2009 – G20 Launches Stakeholder Engagement Processes

- The G20 began systematic outreach to stakeholder constituencies.

2012 – Rio+20

- Rio+20 catalysed new multi-stakeholder partnerships and encouraged organisations within the nine constituencies to register their own voluntary commitments.

2013–2015 – 2030 Agenda & SDG Development

- Whereas partnerships are a prerequisite for the successful implementation of all 17 SDGs, Goal 17 in particular calls for revitalising global partnerships, prompting the expansion of multi-stakeholder collaborations across all goals.

2014 – SAMOA Pathway Principles for Partnerships

- The SAMOA Pathway reinforced principles for effective multi-stakeholder partnerships, particularly for Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

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2016 – Marrakech Partnership for Global Climate Action (MPGCA)

- Under the Climate Champions, the MPGCA strengthened collaboration between governments and non-Party stakeholders to support Paris Agreement implementation.

2017, 2022, 2025 – UN Ocean Conferences

- These conferences mobilised action and multi-stakeholder partnerships to accelerate the delivery of SDG 14 on ocean sustainability.

2023 and 2026 – UN Water Conferences

- Designed to mobilise voluntary commitments and partnerships, these conferences support global progress towards SDG 6 on clean water and sanitation.

Overview

As discussed in previous chapters, stakeholder engagement has developed from the 1992 Earth Summit, which identified the roles and responsibilities of the nine Major groups and other stakeholders. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)[184] then advocated that non-state stakeholders working together, sometimes with governments and the UN, could serve as an engine for implementing global agreements. These partnerships were called Type II partnerships. They were guided by the Bali Guiding Principles on MSPs.[185]

WSSD saw over 300 multi-stakeholder partnerships launched. WSSD also recognised the need for a 10-year framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP)[186] to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production. Again, utilising a multi-stakeholder approach. It would take until the Rio+20 conference[187] for this approach to be formally adopted.

This approach was accelerated through the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, where over 700 voluntary commitments and multi-stakeholder partnerships were launched. This grew after the conference to over 1400.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in particular the 17 Goals and 169 targets launched at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Heads of State in September 2015, opened the door to an avalanche of new and revised multi-stakeholder partnerships to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDESA has produced a list of the numbers for each goal, and if you go deeper, what those partnerships are addressing and who is involved with them and who was involved, will be easily demonstrated.

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The table below shows how 2025 initiatives on the SDG Action Platform[188] are distributed across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many initiatives contribute to multiple SDGs, reflecting the interconnected nature of sustainable development.

Sustainable Development Goal	**Number of Multi-stakeholder Partnerships on the UN website**
SGD 1: No Poverty	1495
SDG 2: Zero Hunger	1424
SDG 3: Good Health and Well Being	1326
SDG 4: Quality Education	1870
SDG 5: Gender Equality	1721
SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation	1862
SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy	1081
SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth	2011
SDG 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	1092
SDG 10: Reduce Inequalities	1028
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	1274
SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production	1715
SDG 13: Climate Action	2238
SDG 14: Life Below Water	2084
SDG 15: Life on Land	1363
SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	1073
SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals	2290

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Multi-stakeholder Partnerships Around Delivering Action on the Triple Planetary Crisis

Addressing the interconnected challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution requires extensive collaboration among governments, stakeholders among governments, Major Groups and other stakeholders, as well as local communities. Multi-stakeholder partnerships have become essential in driving progress by pooling resources, knowledge, and innovation toward shared environmental goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals database[189] provides a repository to review which multistakeholder partnerships are active on which goals and targets.

The SUN Movement

While transparency is frequently referenced in multi-stakeholder partnerships, many initiatives have limited mechanisms to assess whether commitments translate into measurable environmental or risk-reduction outcomes. The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, **launched in 2010 by the United Nations Secretary-General, today unites nearly 70 countries and thousands of stakeholders,** offering a useful reference framework for integrating accountability into multi-actor collaboration, through national ownership, shared results frameworks, and regular monitoring and reporting. Experience also suggests that voluntary partnerships are most effective when supported by national regulatory frameworks and clear technical guidance, particularly when they connect major groups with implementers at sub-programmatic levels. Such linkages can help identify capacity gaps, support implementation, and inform more resilient governance structures. Similar approaches could be considered in partnerships addressing chemicals management, water quality, and pollution prevention.

Chemicals and Waste

Partnerships in this area focus on reducing harmful pollutants, improving waste management, and promoting circular economy approaches. Initiatives such as the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution[190] and the Global Partnership on Marine Litter[191] unite countries and industries to reduce chemical releases, safely recycle materials, and prevent plastic waste from entering ecosystems.

The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management[192] (SAICM) and its successor, the Global Framework on Chemicals, while voluntary (not legally binding) in nature, operate as multi-stakeholder/multi-sectoral frameworks. In essence, NGOs (including public and private-sector NGOs), intergovernmental and international organisations, and academia all have equal say as governments in their decision-making processes. While not legally binding, some governments (such as Germany) consider the GFC to be “politically binding.”

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Biodiversity

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) decided at COP15 to adopt the Kunming-Montreal Framework[193], which serves as a framework for work across all biodiversity-related conventions.

Efforts to halt biodiversity loss rely on cooperation between local communities, conservation organisations, other stakeholder groups - particularly indigenous peoples - and governments. Partnerships such as the Global Partnership on Biodiversity and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration unite diverse actors to restore degraded lands, protect species, and promote sustainable land use practices that benefit both nature and people. The CBD also contains key provisions[194] that encourage multi-stakeholder cooperation and the development of partnerships.

In addition to the Kunming-Montréal Framework's emphasis on multi-stakeholder partnerships, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals, has developed a database of partnerships for all the SDGs.

The two most relevant SDGs for biodiversity are:

- *SDG 14* - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (Life Below Water).
    - 3,084 multi-stakeholder partnerships are seeking to deliver the targets[195] of this goal.
- *SDG 15* - Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss (Life on Land).
    - 1,363 multistakeholder partnerships are working to deliver the targets[196] of this goal.

Examples of initiatives to support the Convention on Biological Diversity include:

- International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress[197]: This event brings together thousands of leaders from government, stakeholder groups, indigenous peoples, business, and academia to focus on nature conservation and develop new global frameworks for biodiversity.
- CitiesWithNature[198]: A platform launched by the IUCN and The Nature Conservancy that encourages cities to value and incorporate nature into urban planning, with participation from subnational governments like Regions4, which represents regional and provincial governments.
- CBD's Sustainable Ocean Initiative[199]: This initiative coordinates between regional seas and fisheries bodies, UN bodies (like FAO and IMO), governments, and stakeholder groups to

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improve working relationships and support the implementation of biodiversity goals, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

- Consortium of Scientific Partners on Biodiversity[200]: A group of scientific institutions, like the Botanic Gardens of the Rheinische Friedrich Wilhelms Universität Bonn, that works with the CBD Secretariat to promote collaborative activities, share information on invasive alien species, and support action against them.
- NBSAP Forum[201]: Supported by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), this forum focuses on national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) and is executed by the UN Environment-World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC).
- The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)[202]: An association of oil palm growers, processors, manufacturers, retailers, banks, investors, and NGOs that promotes the growth and use of sustainable palm oil through cooperation across the supply chain.
- The Forests Dialogue (TFD)[203]: Brings together individuals from diverse backgrounds, including industry, NGOs, and intergovernmental agencies, to address divisive issues and catalyse consensus on sustainable forest management, including forest certification and illegal logging.
- The Amazon Initiative[204]: Led by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and funded by several countries and the Green Climate Fund, this initiative supports regenerative activities in the Amazon basin, with a strong focus on empowering Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.

Climate Change

Collaborative climate initiatives—such as the Race to Zero campaign and the Climate and Clean Air Coalition—bring together countries, cities, and businesses to align with global net-zero objectives. These partnerships drive the just transition to renewable energy, strengthen resilience to extreme weather, and facilitate the exchange of technologies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Collectively, such multi-stakeholder efforts reflect the spirit of cooperation essential to addressing the triple planetary crisis and fostering a more sustainable and resilient world.

Key Factors for Partnership Success

- Clear Goals: Partnerships are more effective when they have precise and ambitious goals that limit room for interpretation.
- Funding: Stable and predictable funding streams are crucial for long-term success, as they help avoid dependence on volatile voluntary contributions.
- Management: Strong, efficient internal management practices are essential to achieving partnership goals.

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- Meaningful Participation: The meaningful involvement of all stakeholders, including vulnerable groups and local communities, is fundamental for building trust and generating solutions that are both acceptable and sustainable.

Conclusion

The recognition that governments alone could not deliver on global policy decisions led to the emergence of multi-stakeholder partnerships since the World Summit on Sustainable Development as a way to achieve a whole-of-society approach, whether at the local, sub-national, or national level. Engaging all stakeholders as engines of implementation has had mixed success. The further away from the 2002 Summit, the more these processes are seeking greater transparency, monitoring, and reporting. In addition to the need for steady and predictable funding streams, addressing potential conflicts of interest is essential, as unmanaged conflicts can undermine trust, credibility, and the legitimacy of partnership outcomes. As we write this guide, perhaps the strongest accountability in partnerships exists in the area of Nutrition, pioneered by David Nabarro. The Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement[205] offers an example to other sectors on how to review MSPs. The time has come for a more critical review of MSPs

This guide suggests, based on experience since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, that establishing Strategic Partnerships with Major Groups and Stakeholders at the UNEP Sub-Programmatic level provides an opportunity to help deliver those projects and activities. This could enhance UNEP's impact by aligning partnerships with strategic implementing partners while also enabling further contributions to policy and governance discussions based on their experience and lessons learned.

The process of engaging Major Groups and other Stakeholders as partners around the UNEP's Programme of Work 2026-27's and its Medium-Term Strategy can align its engagement with Major Groups and other Stakeholders more closely with programme implementation – currently, there is too often a disconnect between representatives of Major Groups and other Stakeholders who contribute at a policy level and those who act as implementing partners or have technical expertise in the area.

Meetings with Strategic Partners and technical experts, which occur every two years, could go some way toward ensuring this. Narrowing the gap between these two groups will ensure that policy better reflects lessons learned.

Multi-stakeholder Partnerships around UNEP's agreed Medium Term Strategy and its latest Programme of Works could align additional resources to help deliver common objectives between stakeholders and UNEP.

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'World in Progress', a giant painting on the lawn of UNEP HQ in Nairobi to mark UNEA 5.2. Source: Saype.[206]

8. Science Bodies for the Triple Planetary Crisis

Science plays a vital role in guiding global action on climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. To strengthen the link between scientific knowledge and policy decisions, several intergovernmental science-policy bodies have been established — each focusing on one of the three dimensions of the triple planetary crisis.

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Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Established in 1988 by the World Meteorological Organisation[207] (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Programme[208] (UNEP), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change[209] (IPCC) provides governments at all levels with reliable scientific information to support the development of effective climate policies. Its reports serve as a cornerstone for international climate negotiations.

The IPCC is composed of 195 member governments[210], all of which are members of the UN or WMO or have a direct membership with the WMO. Thousands of scientists and experts from around the world contribute voluntarily to its work, assessing and synthesising the vast body of climate research published each year. These assessments offer comprehensive insights into the drivers of climate change, its current and future impacts, and strategies for mitigation and adaptation.

Each report undergoes a rigorous, open, and transparent review process by both experts and governments to ensure balance, accuracy, and representation of diverse perspectives. While the IPCC does not conduct original research, it plays a crucial role in identifying the strength of scientific consensus and highlighting areas where further study is needed.

The IPCC is divided into three working groups and a task force:

- *Working Group 1* - The physical science basis of climate change
- *Working Group 2* - Climate change impacts
- *Working Group 3* - Mitigation of climate action

The main objective of the task force is to develop and refine a methodology for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories[211]. While this is the primary task force of the IPCC, other task forces may be developed based on a particular topic or question. An example of this is the 2018 task group developed to improve gender balance and address gender-related issues within the IPCC. The work developed from the 2018 task force was fundamental to adopting IPCC's Gender Policy and Implementation Plan.[212] Among the key IPCC reports is the so-called comprehensive Assessment Reports, which is about the state of scientific, technical and socio-economic knowledge on climate change, its impacts and future risks, and options for reducing the rate at which climate change is taking place. The 6th Assessment Report was published in 2023, and the next one is expected to be published in 2029.

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services[213] (IPBES) is an independent intergovernmental body established by UN Member States

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to strengthen the science-policy communication for biodiversity and ecosystem services for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, long-term human well-being, and sustainable development. It was established on 21 April 2012 in Panama City, Panama, by 94 governments. Though it is not a United Nations body, its work ties closely to UN processes and frameworks, particularly the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which provides secretariat support. IPBES brings together experts from around the world to assess the state of biodiversity, ecosystems, and the benefits they provide to people. Its assessments inform policymakers, guide international negotiations, and identify options for actions at local, national, and global levels to halt biodiversity loss and promote the sustainable use of natural resources.

IPBES is made up of a governing body known as a plenary, which meets once per year. There are currently 150 member States of IPBES, though a large number of NGOs, organisations, conventions, and Major Groups participate in the formal IPBES process as observers, with several thousand stakeholders, ranging from scientific experts to representatives of academic research institutions, local communities and the private sector, all contributing to and benefitting from their work.

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution

Recognising the need for a comparable mechanism addressing chemicals, waste, and pollution, the international community worked to establish the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution (ISP-CWP). This panel aims to strengthen the global science-policy interface in this area, providing authoritative assessments and guidance to reduce pollution and promote sound chemical and waste management across all sectors.

The ISP-CWP was established on 20 June 2025 under the mandate of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) under resolution ⅝ adopted in March 2022. This panel addresses one of the most critical but under-supported pillars of the global environmental agenda - pollution. ISP-CWP aims to uplift this critical environmental topic through assessing existing knowledge, identifying policy options, and building on what is effective, inclusive, and grounded in scientific evidence.

Governments, scientists, and stakeholders from all regions agreed to the Panel's foundational document through an intergovernmental process[214] from 2022 to 2025. The Secretariat of the Panel is hosted by UNEP. The first plenary session (ISP-CWP P1)[215] will be held from 2 February 2026 to 6 February 2026 at the Geneva International Conference Centre[216] (CICG).

Together, these science-policy bodies form a critical foundation for understanding and responding to the Triple Planetary Crisis, each contributing authoritative assessments that

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guide global, regional, and national action. While the IPCC, IPBES, and the ISP-CWP provide specialised assessments on climate change, biodiversity, and pollution, the broader UN system also produces major scientific syntheses that complement this work. UNEP regularly publishes the Global Environment Outlook (GEO), an integrated assessment of the state of the global environment, emerging trends, and policy pathways. Likewise, the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) commissions the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR), which provides science-based insights and recommendations for implementing the 2030 Agenda. Together, these assessments help ensure that policymakers have access to credible, interdisciplinary, and actionable science to inform decisions addressing the interlinked dimensions of the Triple Planetary Crisis.

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Tree planting ceremony in Jaunapur, 3 June 2011.[217]

9. Recent Successes on the Triple Planetary Crisis

In recent years, the global community has made significant strides in addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution through landmark agreements and collaborative scientific initiatives. These achievements reflect the growing commitment of nations to work together toward a sustainable future, guided by science, shared responsibility, and equitable action. The following examples highlight some of the most notable success stories shaping global environmental governance and driving progress toward a healthier planet.

Minamata Convention on Mercury

Adopted in 2013 and entered into force in 2017, the Minamata Convention on Mercury[218] is a global treaty designed to protect human health and the environment from the adverse effects of mercury. Named after the Japanese bay of Minamata, where industrial mercury poisoning

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caused severe illness and the death of approximately 2,000 people during nearly four decades in the mid-20th century, the convention represents a milestone in international chemical management and pollution prevention, and the resulting convention is a good example of fruitful and collaborative efforts between governments, Major Groups and other stakeholders.

The treaty controls the entire mercury life cycle, from mining and trade to product manufacturing, emissions, and waste disposal. It bans new mercury mines, phases out mercury-added products like thermometers and batteries, and restricts industrial processes using mercury. Countries must also develop national plans to reduce emissions from sources such as coal-fired power plants and artisanal gold mining, which are major contributors to global mercury pollution.

Through cooperation and technical assistance, the Minamata Convention supports developing countries in implementing cleaner technologies and monitoring systems. It embodies a model of environmental justice and global solidarity—acknowledging both the scientific urgency of chemical management and the human cost of inaction.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution

Recognising the growing threat of pollution and chemical waste, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste, and Pollution[219] (ISP-CWP), established in June 2025, was proposed to strengthen the science-policy interface for these issues, similar to how the IPCC and IPBES serve climate and biodiversity. Formally established by the United Nations Environment Assembly[220] (UNEA 6) in 2024, the panel aims to provide policymakers with credible, comprehensive, and independent scientific assessments on pollution and chemicals to inform global action.

The panel will compile and analyse data on pollutants' health and environmental impacts, evaluate policy effectiveness, and identify emerging risks. It will also help bridge gaps between governments, researchers, industry, and Major Groups, fostering shared accountability and evidence-based decision-making.

By establishing the ISP-CWP, the international community acknowledges pollution as one of the most urgent yet under-addressed dimensions of the triple planetary crisis. The panel is expected to become the authoritative voice on chemical and waste science—helping to guide coordinated, global responses to toxic pollution in the decades ahead.

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The Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol

Adopted in 2016, the Kigali Amendment[221] builds on the historic success of the Montreal Protocol[222], the world's most effective environmental treaty for protecting the ozone layer. While the original protocol targeted ozone-depleting substances, the Kigali Amendment focuses on hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)[223], potent greenhouse gases used in refrigeration and air conditioning. Though HFCs do not deplete the ozone layer, they have a global warming potential thousands of times greater than carbon dioxide.

The amendment requires countries to phase down HFC production and consumption by more than 80 per cent over the next 30 years. This shift is expected to prevent up to 0.4°C of global temperature rise by the end of the century—making it one of the most significant climate mitigation actions taken to date.

The Kigali Amendment also promotes the adoption of energy-efficient, climate-friendly cooling technologies and provides financial and technical support to developing nations through the Multilateral Fund. It exemplifies how global cooperation, backed by sound science and strong policy frameworks, can address both ozone protection and climate change simultaneously.

The Paris Climate Agreement

Adopted in 2015 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change[224] (UNFCCC), the Paris Agreement[225] represents a global commitment to limit global warming to well below 2°C (and preferably 1.5°C) above pre-industrial levels. It is the first legally binding climate treaty requiring all nations, developed and developing alike, to set and communicate their own climate action plans, known as Nationally Determined Contributions[226] (NDCs).

The agreement emphasises transparency, adaptation, and equity, recognising the differing capabilities and responsibilities of nations. Countries are encouraged to increase their ambition every five years, reflecting evolving science and technology. The Paris Agreement also mobilises finance and capacity-building support for developing countries, aiming to make low-carbon and climate-resilient development universally achievable.

Despite ongoing challenges in implementation, the Paris Agreement has reshaped the global policy landscape. It has catalysed national commitments, business innovation, and stakeholder action—making climate action a central pillar of sustainable development.

Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing

Adopted in 2010 under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)[227], the Nagoya Protocol[228] establishes a legal framework for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising

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from the use of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge. Its goal is to ensure that countries and communities providing these resources are rightfully compensated and included in research and innovation that depends on their biodiversity.

The protocol requires users of genetic resources—such as pharmaceutical, agricultural, and biotechnology companies—to obtain prior informed consent and negotiate mutually agreed terms with provider countries or Indigenous peoples. This helps protect biodiversity-rich nations and Indigenous communities from exploitation while promoting conservation through equitable incentives.

By promoting trust, transparency, and fairness, the Nagoya Protocol strengthens global cooperation in biodiversity management. It bridges conservation and sustainable use with human rights and equity, ensuring that those who protect and steward biodiversity also share in its benefits.

Together, these landmark agreements and initiatives illustrate how international cooperation, scientific expertise, and equitable governance can deliver real progress on the triple planetary crisis. From curbing mercury and HFC emissions to safeguarding biodiversity and regulating chemical waste, each treaty demonstrates a shared global commitment to sustainability. While challenges remain, these successes provide a roadmap for future action—showing that with collaboration, transparency, and accountability, tangible environmental recovery is possible.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

Though not a UN convention, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora[229] (CITES) is a result of an initiative of IUCN – the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in 1963. The office of CITES is administered by UNEP in Geneva. CITES entered into force in 1975, and its aim is to ensure that international trade (import/export) in specimens of animals and plants included under CITES does not threaten the survival of the species in the wild. It is one of the oldest conservation and sustainable use agreements in place and has 185 parties or member states. Although CITES is legally binding on the Parties, it does not take the place of national laws. CITES affords varying degrees of protection to nearly 41,000 species. It works closely with the UNCBD.

The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

In addition to chemical and waste management more broadly, targeted international efforts addressing specific pollution sources are emerging. For example, the FCTC[230] includes a dedicated article on environmental protection and recently adopted a decision to strengthen measures against environmental harm from tobacco products. This is particularly

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relevant given that cigarette butts are the most littered item on the planet and one of the most toxic forms of daily consumer waste, while the growing prevalence of single-use e-cigarettes adds a new environmental challenge. Integrating such source-specific evidence into broader assessments like those conducted by ISP-CWP can enhance the effectiveness of global pollution reduction strategies and support science-informed policy interventions. FCTC includes a dedicated article on environmental protection and recently adopted a decision to strengthen measures against environmental harm from tobacco products. This is particularly relevant given that cigarette butts are the most littered item on the planet and one of the most toxic forms of daily consumer waste, while the growing prevalence of single-use e-cigarettes adds a new environmental challenge. Integrating such source-specific evidence into broader assessments like those conducted by ISP-CWP can enhance the effectiveness of global pollution reduction strategies and support science-informed policy interventions.

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Installation at UNEA-5, 2022, in Kenya, made by Benjamin von Wong.[231]

10. UN Global Finance, the Environment, and Sustainable Development

Global financial governance within the United Nations system plays a central role in advancing sustainable development and addressing the world's most pressing environmental challenges. Through a coordinated network of multilateral mechanisms, funds, and partnerships, the UN mobilises and allocates financial resources to support countries in implementing international environmental agreements and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This system is designed to ensure that financial flows align with global sustainability priorities—promoting climate resilience, biodiversity protection, pollution reduction, and equitable development. By strengthening transparency, accountability, and cooperation among nations and institutions, UN financial governance helps translate high-level commitments into concrete, measurable actions that foster a more sustainable, environmentally sound, and resilient global future.

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Financing for Development and the Addis Ababa Action Plan

With the adoption of the Agenda for Development in 1997 and the Millennium Declaration in 2000, the UN and Member states came to recognise the need for an upgraded system for international finance. With this background, and with support from the Mexican government, the UN organised the first Financing for Development conference in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002. The FfD process was a reality, and efforts to streamline financial means for regulated global means came into focus. Building on the FfD process, and with financing the 2030 Agenda in mind, the UN member states agreed to, in 2015, the Addis Ababa Action Plan. This is a global framework for financing sustainable development, providing a comprehensive set of policy actions to support the achievement of the SDGs. The Agenda also serves as a guide for governments, international organisations, the private sector, and stakeholders to implement the SDGs and foster sustainable development globally.

Global Environment Facility

Established in 1991, the Global Environment Facility[232] (GEF) is one of the oldest and most significant international funding mechanisms for addressing global environmental challenges. It serves as a financial mechanism for several multilateral environmental agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity[233] (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change[234] (UNFCCC), the Stockholm[235] and Minamata Conventions[236], and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification[237] (UNCCD). The GEF provides grants and blended financing to support projects in developing countries that address issues such as biodiversity loss, climate change mitigation and adaptation, land degradation, chemicals and waste management, and international waters.

Over the decades, the GEF has evolved into a critical platform for mobilising partnerships among governments, stakeholders, and the private sector. Its integrated approach promotes cross-sectoral solutions that align environmental protection with economic development and poverty reduction. By financing initiatives that demonstrate innovative, scalable, and sustainable practices, the GEF helps countries meet their environmental obligations while strengthening local capacities for long-term resilience.

The Green Climate Fund

The Green Climate Fund[238] (GCF) was established in 2010 under the UNFCCC as the primary global vehicle for financing climate action in developing countries. Its mandate is to promote a paradigm shift toward low-emission and climate-resilient development by channelling financial resources from developed to developing nations. The Fund supports both mitigation and adaptation projects—ranging from renewable energy transitions and sustainable transport systems to ecosystem restoration and climate-smart agriculture.

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Governed by an independent board with equal representation from developed and developing countries, the GCF emphasises country ownership and direct access, allowing national institutions to manage funds and implement projects tailored to their specific needs. The Fund also seeks to mobilise private investment and catalyse co-financing, leveraging limited public resources to achieve larger-scale impact. As the largest multilateral climate fund, the GCF plays a pivotal role in meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement and enhancing global climate resilience.

Climate Investment Funds

Climate Investment Funds are a financing instrument that invests in climate change adaptation and mitigation projects, and are separated into two specialised trust funds: the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) and the Strategic Climate Fund (SCF).

The Climate Investment Funds are a financing instrument that invests in climate change adaptation and mitigation projects and are separated into two specialised trust funds: the Clean Technology Fund and the Strategic Climate Fund. As of October 2011, approximately US $4.3 billion and US $1.9 billion have been pledged by donors to the CTF and the SCF, respectively. In November 2011, the CIFs approved US$1.08 billion in near zero interest loans and grants to support countries such as Bolivia, Honduras, India, Jamaica, Lao PDR, Mali, Mexico and Nepal.

Despite these vast sums of money being pledged through the CIFs, figures for the World Bank energy investment illustrate that it will take a significant amount of time to divert investment from the World Bank (via mechanisms such as the CIF) away from fossil fuel-based industries and towards clean and renewable technology. For instance, in 2007–2009, there was a 49 percent versus 15 percent distribution between fossil fuels and renewable energy, respectively; the World Bank still has a long way to go before it achieves a truly ‘sustainable’ status.

In addition to much-needed reform in the World Bank Group’s energy policy, there are also calls for a more effective mainstreaming of environmental considerations into all the World Bank’s operations. Phasing out investment in fossil fuels represents an important step in making the World Bank a true agent of sustainable development, but there are a range of other areas, including mining, agriculture, transport and forestry, which require investment. Many argue that niche investment in sustainable development projects will have little impact if ‘business as usual’ reigns elsewhere within the World Bank’s operations. Some claim that the World Bank Group, and specifically the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which acts as the World Bank’s private sector arm, continues to provide loans for mining projects that carry significant environmental risks and, as such, have implications for human rights. Infrastructure development projects that are backed by the World Bank Group can also have significant implications for the achievement of sustainability, especially when they involve large-scale road construction or support for energy-intensive industries. Agricultural investment also presents a big challenge – enhancing food production through funding agri-business that is reliant

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on fertilisers is not sustainable. Greening the IFIs, therefore, requires ongoing dialogue between the World Bank, its shareholders, and stakeholders, so that sustainable outcomes can be achieved that do not simply 'do no harm' but positively contribute to environmental outcomes.

Major Economies Forum

The global sustainable development process has limited jurisdiction over the economic pillar, which is primarily shaped by more powerful intergovernmental groups such as the G8, G20, the Major Economies Forum (MEF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). While global summit outcome documents articulate commendable aspirations, achieving these commitments will require reforms across these economic governance systems. Legally binding environmental obligations may conflict with WTO rules, and many principles of the 1992 Rio Declaration remain at odds with the largely unregulated global financial system including the post-global financial crisis, remain at odds with many of the principles of the 1992 Rio Declaration, even post-global financial crisis. For sustainable development to succeed, environmental, economic, and social pillars must be complementary rather than contradictory, with governance systems designed to integrate all three effectively.

REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries)

REDD+ represents an effort to develop a mechanism that redistributes benefits by providing monetary compensation from developed countries to developing countries that host large forests. These forests deliver global benefits, such as carbon sequestration, yet their preservation costs are not always shared equitably. Despite these opportunities, REDD+ has faced criticism due to its market-based approach, which may have limitations. Establishing appropriate international regulatory frameworks and ensuring the role of global institutions remains a critical challenge for REDD+.

Strategic Climate Fund (SCF)

The Climate Investment Funds (CIF) are financing instruments designed to support climate change adaptation and mitigation projects. CIFs are divided into two specialised trust funds: the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) and the Strategic Climate Fund (SCF), which target different types of projects and investments to advance sustainable development goals.

International Financial Institutions

International Financial Institutions (IFIs), including the World Bank and regional development banks, play a critical role in implementing global commitments to sustainable development, particularly by providing finance to developing countries. The World Bank often acts as a trustee for multilateral funds established through UN processes, such as the Adaptation Fund and the

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Green Climate Fund, and also manages funds established outside official UN structures, including the Climate Investment Funds (CIF). As such, the Bank dispenses billions of dollars in development finance, which has the potential to support transformational changes toward sustainable development.

However, this role raises two major challenges. First, the World Bank must demonstrate sufficient representation, transparency, and accountability in managing these funds—qualities critics argue it often lacks. The Bank's decision-making is seen as largely donor-driven, reflecting the priorities of developed countries rather than those of the developing countries it is intended to support. Second, the coherence of the Bank's broader funding portfolio is a concern. Critics highlight that much of the World Bank's financing continues to support "business as usual" projects, including investment in fossil fuels and extractive industries. In 2010, for example, the World Bank Group's investment in fossil fuels reached US$4.7 billion in just the first ten months, up from US$3.1 billion in 2008, while funding for coal-fired power stations increased forty-fold over five years to £2.8 billion. A particularly controversial loan in 2010 financed South Africa's Eskom coal-fired power station. These examples illustrate the tension between the Bank's potential to drive sustainable development and its ongoing investment in sectors with high environmental risks.

The International Finance Corporation (IFC), as the private sector arm of the World Bank, continues to fund projects in mining, infrastructure, and agriculture that carry significant environmental and human rights risks. Such investments, especially in large-scale road construction, energy-intensive industries, and fertiliser-dependent agribusiness, can undermine sustainable outcomes. To align IFI financing with sustainable development objectives, ongoing dialogue between the World Bank, its shareholders and stakeholders is essential. Reform efforts must ensure that IFIs not only avoid causing harm but also actively contribute to positive environmental and social outcomes.

The Adaptation Fund

The Adaptation Fund[239] was established in 2001 under the Kyoto Protocol[240] to finance concrete adaptation projects and programmes in developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. Unlike other climate funds that primarily rely on donor contributions, the Adaptation Fund is partially financed through a 2% levy on Certified Emission Reductions (CERs) issued under the Clean Development Mechanism[241] (CDM), making it one of the few mechanisms with an innovative revenue stream linked directly to carbon markets.

The Fund focuses on supporting community-based and country-driven initiatives that enhance resilience to climate impacts, including food security, coastal protection, disaster risk management, and water resource management. It also pioneered the "direct access" modality, which allows accredited national and regional institutions to receive funding directly, strengthening local ownership and capacity. The Adaptation Fund has become an essential

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model for equitable and accessible climate finance, particularly for small island developing states (SIDS) and least developed countries (LDCs).

The Loss and Damage Fund

The Loss and Damage Fund[242] was established at the UNFCCC COP27 in 2022 as a historic breakthrough in global climate finance. It aims to provide financial assistance to countries facing unavoidable and irreversible impacts of climate change—those that cannot be prevented through mitigation or adaptation efforts. These include losses from extreme weather events such as floods, hurricanes, and heatwaves, as well as slow-onset events like sea-level rise, desertification, and glacial retreat.

The Fund represents a long-standing demand from developing countries for fair recognition of the disproportionate burdens they bear despite contributing least to global emissions. While still under development, the Loss and Damage Fund is expected to coordinate closely with existing climate finance mechanisms and prioritise vulnerable populations, including small island and low-lying nations. Its establishment marks a major step toward climate justice within the UNFCCC framework, signalling a global commitment to addressing the full spectrum of climate impacts—from prevention and adaptation to recovery and reconstruction.

Joint SDG Fund

The Joint SDG Fund[243] was established by the United Nations in 2017 to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by supporting integrated, multi-agency initiatives. Unlike single-agency funding streams, the Joint SDG Fund provides pooled financing that encourages collaboration among UN agencies, ensuring that development programmes address interconnected social, economic, and environmental challenges simultaneously. Its focus is on promoting systemic approaches that advance multiple SDGs, fostering efficiency and impact at scale.

The Fund prioritises initiatives in countries facing complex development challenges, particularly those affected by conflict, fragility, or humanitarian crises. By integrating gender equality, climate resilience, and inclusivity into programme design, it ensures that interventions reach the most vulnerable populations. Its flexible funding model allows UN bodies to pilot innovative solutions, scale successful interventions, and strengthen national capacities for sustainable development planning.

Through its multi-agency, multi-sector approach, the Joint SDG Fund catalyses transformation, linking global goals with local implementation. It also provides a platform for knowledge sharing and the dissemination of best practices, enabling countries to replicate successful models and accelerate progress toward the 2030 Agenda.

UN Capital Development Fund

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The United Nations Capital Development Fund[244] (UNCDF) provides financing to support economic development in the world's least developed countries (LDCs), with a focus on inclusive finance and local development. Its mandate is to expand access to financial services, investment, and local infrastructure, particularly for underserved populations and marginalised communities. By targeting both public and private resources, UNCDF helps countries create sustainable economic opportunities while addressing inequalities.

UNCDF emphasises local solutions to development challenges, such as strengthening municipal capacities, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and facilitating digital finance. Its programmes aim to empower local actors, enhance financial inclusion, and support the delivery of public services in ways that are equitable, transparent, and sustainable. In this way, UNCDF contributes to building resilient communities capable of responding to environmental, social, and economic shocks.

By integrating development finance with environmental and sustainability priorities, UNCDF plays a key role in linking local economic growth to global SDG objectives. Its investments strengthen the institutional and financial infrastructure necessary to ensure long-term resilience, enabling LDCs to advance sustainable development while addressing poverty, climate vulnerability, and systemic inequalities.

Peace and Development Trust Fund

The United Nations Peace and Development Trust Fund[245] (UNPDF) was established to support integrated peacebuilding and development initiatives in countries affected by conflict, fragility, or post-crisis recovery. Its aim is to provide flexible, catalytic financing that enables UN agencies and partners to implement comprehensive strategies that address both immediate humanitarian needs and longer-term development objectives.

UNPDF promotes coordinated approaches across peace, governance, human rights, and environmental sustainability, recognising the interconnections between security, development, and ecological resilience. By pooling resources from multiple UN agencies, the Fund enhances efficiency, reduces duplication, and strengthens multi-stakeholder partnerships at national and local levels. Its programmes are aimed at reaching the most vulnerable populations, including women, youth, and marginalised communities, ensuring that recovery and development initiatives are inclusive and equitable.

The Fund's role is particularly critical in post-conflict contexts, where institutional capacity is limited, governance is fragile, and environmental risks are often exacerbated by social instability. UNPDF financing provides the flexibility to respond to evolving conditions while supporting integrated planning, long-term resilience, and sustainable development outcomes in fragile and conflict-affected states.

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Country-Level Peace and Development Trust Fund

The Country-Level Peace and Development Trust Fund[246] (UNPDF) is a decentralised mechanism that operates at the national level to support context-specific peacebuilding and development efforts. Unlike the central UNPDF, which addresses multiple countries or regions, these funds are tailored to the priorities and needs of individual countries, allowing for targeted interventions that respond to unique political, social, and environmental challenges.

Country-level UNPDFs focus on strengthening governance, promoting inclusive economic development, and addressing environmental vulnerabilities in fragile contexts. They enable local governments, stakeholders, and UN bodies to collaborate closely, ensuring that programmes are aligned with national development strategies and peacebuilding agendas. By emphasising country ownership, these funds enhance the sustainability of interventions and build local capacity to manage complex challenges over the long term.

UNPDF has two sub-Funds. The Secretary-General's Peace and Security Sub-Fund,[247] is aimed at financing projects and activities that support world peace and security. And the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Sub-Fund,[248] is intended to finance activities in support of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by Member States in September 2015.

Through flexible and responsive financing, the Country-Level UNPDF supports a wide range of activities, from institutional capacity building and public service delivery to environmental restoration and climate adaptation. This approach ensures that peace and development efforts are locally grounded, inclusive, and able to address interconnected social, economic, and environmental risks effectively.

Least Developed Countries Fund

The Least Developed Countries Fund[249] (LDCF) was established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to support the most vulnerable nations in adapting to the adverse impacts of climate change. Primarily targeting least developed countries (LDCs), the fund finances projects that enhance resilience in sectors such as agriculture, water resources, health, and coastal management, while integrating ecosystem-based solutions to address climate risks.

The LDCF is managed by the Global Environment Facility[250] (GEF) and provides grants, technical assistance, and capacity-building support to help LDCs implement National Adaptation Plans[251] (NAPs). It emphasises long-term, country-driven strategies that build institutional capacity and foster community-level resilience. By focusing on the specific vulnerabilities of LDCs, the fund ensures that adaptation measures are equitable, context-sensitive, and aligned with national sustainable development priorities.

Over time, the LDCF has become a key instrument for operationalising climate adaptation in the world's most vulnerable countries. Its projects demonstrate how targeted financing can

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protect livelihoods, ecosystems, and infrastructure while supporting broader SDG implementation, ensuring that climate resilience and sustainable development go hand in hand.

Private Sector Engagement and Corporate Accountability

The private sector has a significant impact on social, economic, and environmental outcomes, and its role in sustainable development governance has been widely recognised. In response, numerous initiatives have been developed, including sustainability reporting frameworks, indexes, and sustainable investment portfolios. Key international initiatives include the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), the UN Global Compact, the Principles for Responsible Investment, the ISO 26000 standard on social responsibility, and the UNEP Statement of Commitment by Financial Institutions on Sustainable Development. These efforts operate at national, regional, and international levels, reflecting growing corporate commitment to environmental and sustainable development objectives.

A Convention on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Accountability is one initiative that could provide a framework to integrate sustainable development governance into the business and corporate sector. The idea of establishing such a convention has gained traction as sustainability reporting, ethical investment, and voluntary corporate initiatives have grown rapidly. The rise of sustainability indexes, the Global Reporting Initiative, the UN Global Compact, the ISO 26000 standard on social responsibility, and the Principles for Responsible Investment all demonstrate a stronger commitment by corporations to sustainability. The new ISO 17298, adopted in October 2025 and called Biodiversity in Strategy and Operations, is the first global biodiversity standard, marking a shift from carbon to nature accounting, which may also sound promising. This ISO is a new international standard to help organisations take action for nature. It will help organisations see how their activities interact with biodiversity, help them prioritize actions at both operational and landscape levels, set measurable objectives and monitor progress and integrate biodiversity into broader sustainability efforts Meanwhile, stakeholder organizations, labour groups, and social movements around the world continue to call on businesses to act responsibly and take accountability for the social, economic, and environmental impacts of their activities. This ongoing debate has become increasingly visible in mainstream media as public expectations for corporate behaviour evolve.

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Sustainable Development Goals.[252]

11. Present Ideas on Governance for the Environment and Sustainable Development

Governance for the environment and for sustainable development today involves a diverse set of actors that operate beyond traditional state-led institutions, spanning research networks, policy think tanks, and advocacy organisations. These entities provide research, analysis, and recommendations that shape international environmental, social, and economic policy, strengthen accountability, and promote inclusive decision-making. They also foster multi-stakeholder collaboration, bridging gaps between governments, Major Groups and other stakeholders, and the private sector. The following organisations exemplify the current landscape of global sustainable development governance initiatives.

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Stimson Center

The Stimson Center[253] is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that addresses global security, environmental sustainability, and economic development challenges. It provides policy research and practical recommendations to strengthen governance structures and international cooperation on issues such as climate change, natural resource management, and sustainable development finance.

Stimson emphasises applied research, often working directly with governments, UN agencies, and international organisations to improve decision-making and operational effectiveness. Its work spans both analytical studies and convening multi-stakeholder dialogues that support consensus-building on complex environmental and development issues.

Through partnerships with universities, international organisations, and stakeholder groups, Stimson produces guidance that strengthens institutional capacities, promotes transparency, and encourages integrated policy approaches. Its outputs are widely used by policymakers to align national strategies with global sustainability frameworks such as the SDGs.

Climate Governance Commission

The Climate Governance Commission[254] (CGC) is an initiative that develops and proposes high-impact, global governance solutions to address the climate and broader Earth system emergency by filling critical gaps in action implementation, policy, and governance. Led by figures like Mary Robinson and Johan Rockström, its goal is to inform and influence international policy conversations to enable faster and more effective collective action to limit global warming to 1.5°C or below.

The CGC has a priority mission: to address the gap between existing climate/Planetary Boundary solutions and their implementation by proposing governance reforms and innovations.

Focusing on various aspects of governance, including proposing reforms for institutions like the UN and G7, developing global financing policies, and strengthening accountability mechanisms for climate and broader Earth system action.

World Federalist Movement

The World Federalist Movement[255] (WFM) was founded in 1947 as a non-profit, non-partisan organisation committed to the realisation of global peace and justice through the development of democratic institutions and the application of international law. The passage of time has brought additional global challenges, including climate change, unchecked aggression, mass migration, global pandemics, and emerging technologies, making fair and effective global governance more necessary and urgent than ever, and this remains WFM's focus. WFM has had notable successes over the years, including playing leading roles in the creation of the

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International Criminal Court, and the 1 for 7 Billion campaign for selecting the Secretary-General of the UN.

WFM sees the global environmental crisis as, at root, a crisis of global governance, and has partnered with the Climate Governance Commission to found Mobilising an Earth Governance Alliance (MEGA). MEGA seeks to build smart coalitions of stakeholders, like-minded states and other actors to incrementally create more effective, equitable and accountable global environmental governance, from focusing the climate COP process on implementation (short-term low-hanging fruit) to reform of the United Nations Charter (medium-term deep reform).

Whether the existential challenges confronting humanity will spur the political will for necessary reforms before a catastrophic tipping point is reached remains uncertain. This is precisely why WFM's mission is so urgent: to advance the strengthening and reform of global governance while there is still time.

Mobilizing an Earth Governance Alliance

The Mobilizing an Earth Governance Alliance (MEGA) is a global coalition of stakeholder group leaders, researchers, practitioners, lawyers, private sector entities and academics working to strengthen and reform global environmental governance. It is cohosted by the WFM and CGC.

MEGA builds momentum for change by connecting diverse actors and creating opportunities for collaboration through events, webinars, communications, and working groups. It serves as a hub for knowledge exchange and capacity building—hosting workshops and convenings that enable stakeholders to share best practices, explore governance innovations, forging cross-sector partnerships vital to sustainable development.

Concurrently, MEGA promotes targeted reforms to the global governance architecture, spanning urgent policy improvements and long-term structural transformation. It identifies critical gaps and strategic entry points for change, develops the research and evidence base, and mobilises coalitions of the willing to advance key reform proposals through diplomacy. It does this in close collaboration with the CGC and WFM, helping to advance the reform proposals put forward by the CGC and drawing on the campaigning and advocacy expertise within WFM. By promoting evidence-based governance, MEGA aims to inform and influence policy responses to interconnected global crises—climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.

MEGA's key priorities include:

- Enhancing the UNFCCC COP process by elevating the visibility and influence of science within climate negotiations and strengthening accountability mechanisms.
- Exploring options for rapid and effective international coordination across environmental and other relevant institutions for a faster, more integrated global response to planetary crises.

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- Advancing the role of international law in environmental governance, building on the momentum from the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on climate change, and architecting an International Court for the Environment.

Through these efforts, MEGA seeks to help shape a more responsive, effective and just global governance system—one capable of safeguarding Earth's life-support systems for present and future generations.

One World Trust

The One World Trust[256] (OWT) is a UK-based organisation focused on promoting accountability, transparency, and effectiveness in global governance. It researches international institutions, offering evaluations and recommendations to improve decision-making and operational efficiency in sustainable development governance.

OWT emphasises citizen engagement and stakeholder participation, providing tools and frameworks for assessing the accountability of international organisations and multi-stakeholder initiatives. Its work highlights best practices in governance and fosters knowledge sharing to enhance the legitimacy and impact of global policies.

Through partnerships with UN agencies, regional organisations, and NGOs, OWT supports efforts to strengthen governance for climate, biodiversity, and sustainable development finance. Its research outputs inform both policy and institutional reforms, helping to align global governance structures with the SDGs.

Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability

The Foundation for Global Governance and Sustainability[257] (FOGGS) has long served as an independent organisation providing research, advisory support, and convening services on global environmental governance. Its work has focused on bridging science, policy, and practice to advance evidence-based sustainable development strategies. Over the years, FOGGS collaborated with governments, international organisations, and civil society groups to design transparent, inclusive, and effective governance frameworks. Its initiatives addressed complex challenges ranging from climate finance and multilateral environmental agreements to transboundary resource management.

FOGGS has also played an important convening role, organising workshops, producing policy briefs, and bringing together expert panels to strengthen global capacity to respond to the triple planetary crisis. Its mission consistently emphasised sustainability, accountability, and the integration of scientific evidence into policymaking.

Following a recent decision by its Executive Board, FOGGS has begun the process of winding down its operations and will formally close in the coming months. The Board noted that, given dwindling resources, it was preferable for the organisation to conclude its work on a strong note rather than continue under increasingly difficult circumstances. During this transition

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period, FOGGS will finalise its remaining projects and ensure that key elements of its work are preserved. A "FOGGS Legacy Platform" is being developed for launch in early 2026, with the aim of making its most significant outputs accessible to the public.

The Earth Governance Alliance, Stimson Center, World Federalists, Climate Governance Commission, One World Trust, and the now-closing FOGGS demonstrate the essential role played by non-state actors in sustainable development governance. Through research, policy guidance, and multi-stakeholder platforms, these organisations complement formal UN institutions and treaty processes. Collectively, they contribute to stronger accountability, transparency, and evidence-based decision-making across climate action, biodiversity conservation, chemicals and pollution management, and broader sustainable development agendas. By connecting science, policy, and practice, they continue to shape a more resilient and effective global governance landscape—even as the institutional ecosystem evolves.

Article 109

Article 109 of the UN Charter[258] sets out the legal basis for convening a *General Conference of the United Nations* with the explicit purpose of revising the Charter. It provides two possible pathways:

1. A conference may be called by a two-thirds vote of the General Assembly and a vote of any nine members of the Security Council; or
2. If no such conference has been held before the tenth annual session following the founding of the UN, a Charter Review Conference should automatically be considered—again requiring a General Assembly decision and Security Council concurrence.

While the automatic review envisioned in the Charter was never realised, Article 109 remains a dormant but active legal mechanism for structural reform of the international system. Scholars, legal experts, and governance reform initiatives—including many of the stakeholder organisations profiled in this chapter—frequently reference Article 109 as a pathway for modernising global governance. For environmental governance in particular, it has been cited as a potential legal route to strengthening international institutions, enhancing accountability, increasing representation, or establishing new bodies such as a World Environment Organisation, an International Court for the Environment, or upgraded UN environmental authorities.

In practice, invoking Article 109 would require significant political will, high-level consensus, and broad support from UN member states—conditions not currently met. Nevertheless, it remains one of the few explicit legal provisions for systemic reform in the global governance architecture. As global environmental challenges intensify, Article 109 is increasingly referenced as part of discussions on long-term institutional transformation.

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International Court for the Environment

The International Court for the Environment[259] (ICE) is a proposed institution to enforce multilateral environmental agreements. Though the idea has circulated for years, it remains a novel mechanism to complement other proposed bodies such as the WEO, UNEO, or a Global Parliament for the Environment. By providing a formal legal framework for compliance, the ICE could enhance accountability, incentivise states to adhere to international environmental commitments, and strengthen the overall architecture of global environmental governance.

Global Governance Forum

The Global Governance Forum's[260] goals are to: (a) promote research on improved or alternative models of global governance in several thematic areas; (b) organize programs to improve dialogue and understanding among those committed to reforming existing institutions and creating new ones to build a more peaceful, prosperous, and just world; (c) assist and cooperate with like-minded stakeholder groups, businesses, and other organizations or initiatives to create an effective community of practice; (d) offer substantive and technical support to governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector and stakeholder groups; and (e) promote a global governance agenda to seize exciting new opportunities for humankind to achieve higher levels of prosperity, health, education, peace, and justice.

Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future

Since 1992 Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future (SF)[261] has been a bridge between stakeholders of all kinds and the international intergovernmental forums where sustainable development, and in particular the environment and issues related to its good governance, are debated, global goals are established, and strategies are mapped out. Its work aims to enhance open, accountable, and participatory decision-making and good governance for sustainable development through the continuous involvement of stakeholders in these forums and in the actions that flow from their work.

For Rio+20[262], SF was under contract with UNDESA to collect views on the two themes of that Summit: "a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication"[263] and "the institutional framework for sustainable development.[264]"

For Stockholm+50 in 2022, SF's Towards Stockholm+50[265] project, a joint initiative by Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future and Forum for utvikling og miljø (the Norwegian Forum for Development and Environment), ForUM[266], was a stakeholder-led initiative funded by the United Nations Environment Programme's Civil Society unit with support from the Government of Sweden. The primary result of that initiative was the publication of 'The People's Environment Narrative[267],' which commemorates 50 years of work for the environment carried out by the United Nations Environment Programme, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders.

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More recently, for UN80 and UNEA 7 and 8, some of its work focuses on the UN80 Initiative, summarised in the report, UN80: Reform of the Multilateral Environmental Agreements – Around the Triple Planetary Crisis of Pollution, Biodiversity, and Climate Change[268]. For this, SF produced a set of 8 papers that examine different suggestions. They are:

Paper 1 – Clustering the Environmental Conventions[269] (C Spence and F Dodds)

Paper 2 – The Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions[270] (M. Stanley-Jones)

Paper 3 – Toward Enhanced Synergies Among Biodiversity-Related MEAs[271] (H-M Schally)

Paper 4 – Clustering Climate Conventions[272] (S Azores)

Paper 5 – Better Use of Expertise in Navigating the Polycrisis[273] (P. Bridgewater and R. Kim)

Paper 6 – Is it Time for the Re-Emergence of the Global Ministerial Environment Forum[274] (J-G Strandenaes)

Paper 7 -Breaking the Deadlock – Ideas for Advancing a Global Treaty on Plastics Pollution[275] (C. Boljkovac)

Paper 8 – Financing the Triple Planetary Crisis of Chemicals and Waste, Biodiversity and Climate Change[276] (C. Boljkovac, H-M Schally, et. al.)

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Geneva Plenary, 2022.[277]

12. Final Reflections on Environment and Sustainable Development Governance

When world leaders established the United Nations in 1945, there appeared to be little institutional space within the new organisation for environmental matters or the concept of sustainable development. Although the environment did not gain a dedicated political and global agenda until the creation of UNEP in 1972, environmental concerns were nonetheless addressed from the outset of the UN's existence. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), also founded in 1945, incorporated environmental considerations into its work on food security and natural resource management. The International Whaling Commission (IWC), established in 1946 though not a UN body, represented the first attempt to regulate the exploitation of natural resources. Working in close cooperation with the UN from its inception, the IWC was also the first organisation to articulate the principle of safeguarding natural resources for future

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generations. Significantly, and influenced by the 1972 Stockholm Conference that led to the establishment of UNEP, the international community agreed in 1982 to adopt a moratorium on commercial whaling — a measure that remains in place today.

Further intergovernmental organisations addressing environmental concerns followed these modest yet significant beginnings of the immediate post–Second World War period. One long-standing area of focus is related to the oceans. The International Maritime Organization (IMO), based in London, was founded in 1948, although it did not begin its operational work until 1959. Its mandate combines legal, normative, and environmental matters relating to maritime affairs. The World Meteorological Organization (WMO), established in 1950, has from the outset included within its mandate atmospheric science, climatology, geophysics, and hydrology – all inherently environmental domains. Notably, it was WMO, together with UNEP, that established the IPCC in 1988.

It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that the UN's engagement with environmental issues began only with UNEP in 1972. One of the UN's most ambitious early environmental initiatives was in fact the Man and the Biosphere Programme, developed throughout the 1960s and 1970s and administered by UNESCO in Paris. Indeed, a central objective of the 1972 Stockholm Conference was the development of a declaration on the human environment – a "document of basic principles." The origins of this idea can be traced to a mid-1960s proposal by UNESCO that the Stockholm Conference prepare a "Universal Declaration on the Protection and Preservation of the Human Environment."

The United Nations has now passed its eightieth anniversary, and UNEP its fiftieth. These decades reveal far more successes than may be apparent at first glance. This is not to suggest that the work is complete – far from it. As this Pocket Guide has shown, numerous agreements, programmes, policies, and tools have emerged from these sustained efforts. One often overlooked achievement of this collective work is the immense body of knowledge the world has accumulated over time. The 1970s are frequently referred to as the "conference decade": the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm; the 1973 Conference on the New International Economic Order in New York; the first World Population Conference in Bucharest in 1974, followed later that year by the World Food Conference in Rome; the first World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975; and the 1976 Habitat Conference on human settlements in Vancouver. Critics dismissed this period as a "conference circus," overlooking the fact that these global gatherings produced, for the first time in history, reliable and comprehensive assessments of the issues under discussion. With this newfound understanding, the international community was finally equipped to begin developing meaningful solutions to national and global challenges.

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Environment and Sustainable Development Governance – Evolving and Challenging Processes

The Pocket Guide has had an overarching theme dealing with governance issues as they relate to the environment and sustainable development, and we have tried to show that governance for environment and sustainable development has evolved significantly over the past eight decades, yet critical challenges remain at multiple levels. As the global community strives to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and respond to the triple planetary crisis, it is essential to reflect on the lessons learned, the persistent barriers, and embrace the strategies that yield the greatest impact. This Pocket Guide does not intend to analyse the dilemmas governments, including the UN, have to face when choosing their course of action. In doing so, they have to keep in mind that there are key considerations for national, subnational, and local governments, societal stakeholders, and even several options to governance approaches – some embracing all elements of democracy, others are less open. But as the Pocket Guide shows, there are tools developed through the UN that can aid in choosing the best option.

Challenges for National, Subnational, and Local Governments

Reports researched and published by the UN system clearly demonstrate that stakeholders face complex and often conflicting demands in implementing environmental and sustainable development policies. National authorities must integrate environmental objectives into economic planning, social policy, and infrastructure development, while coordinating with subnational and local actors to ensure effective implementation. Limited technical capacity, inadequate financial resources, and competing political priorities often constrain the ability of governments to respond decisively to environmental crises. But what the Pocket Guide shows, the UN family has developed and is developing a large response system to these challenges in order to promote globally agreed outcomes as well as assist those nations in need of expert help. We have tried to showcase this in this brief introduction to the global UN work on governance issues.

Subnational and local governments, meanwhile, are on the frontlines of climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and pollution control. They often encounter challenges in mobilising resources, engaging stakeholders, and navigating regulatory frameworks established at higher governance levels. Capacity gaps, lack of technical expertise, and insufficient coordination with national and regional authorities can also limit the effectiveness of local interventions, even when strong policy frameworks exist. Available to the authorities, ‘burdened’ by carrying out the agreements from the many UN conferences, are a host of capacity building tools developed by the UN, and personnel ready to provide this capacity building.

The Pocket Guide attempts to illustrate that effective governance requires mechanisms that bridge these levels, ensuring that policies are adaptable, context-sensitive, and enforceable.

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We have shown that multi-level coordination, inclusive planning processes, and targeted capacity building are crucial for aligning local action with national and global objectives, while maintaining accountability and transparency has been made possible through years of global and well-coordinated negotiations yielding results.

A Continuous Forum with a Responsive Agenda

Still, persistent and insistent work keeps the issues alive and brings results. One of the merits of the Major groups community and other stakeholders is to keep issues alive and present on agendas. UNEP's history can document this. The work on a plastics convention is an example of this. There is ample proof to show that the plastic issue may have been dropped from the global environmental agenda, had it not been for the adamant work of non-state actors. Phasing out lead from petrol is another such example. NGOs raised the issue in the early 1970s, kept it on the agenda and by 1998, the UN Habitat and UNEP were given the mandate to oversee the global implementation of phasing out lead. Non-government stakeholders provided the input, science provided the facts, governments agreed (finally) to the policy, and UNEP provided the forum for agenda setting, presentations of facts, deliberations and finally enactment.

Challenges for Societal Stakeholders

Major Groups and other stakeholders, like community-based organisations, play an essential role in shaping environmental agreements and sustainable development outcomes, yet they also face significant barriers. Resource constraints, often limited access to decision-making platforms, and varying capacities to engage with technical and policy processes can reduce their influence. Moreover, fragmented governance structures may hinder meaningful participation, especially for marginalised or underrepresented groups. UNEP's plenaries have at times been blocked by member states unhappy with the participation of non-state stakeholders, and these conflicts have not always been easily resolved.

For advocacy groups and other stakeholder organisations, the challenge lies in balancing short-term campaigns with long-term systemic engagement. While some actors excel at raising awareness and influencing public opinion, others may struggle to sustain involvement in multi-stakeholder policy processes or co-production initiatives. Ensuring equitable access to governance mechanisms is key to leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and legitimacy that societal stakeholders bring to environmental decision-making. Again, while all this is a key element of governance in decision-making processes, it lies outside of the mandate of the Pocket Guide.

Fostering effective collaboration requires inclusive processes that value diverse perspectives, strengthen local ownership of solutions, and create feedback loops between decision-makers and stakeholders. Without such integration, efforts risk being top-down or externally imposed, undermining both legitimacy and sustainability. We have alluded to these issues in our overview of the partnership initiatives in the Pocket Guide.

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The Need for Common but Differentiated Governance and Meta-Governance

Sustainable and environmental development governance must recognise that not all actors share the same capacities, responsibilities, or impacts. The principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" was raised as one of the 27 Rio Principles back in 1992, and this principle is critical for addressing global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, ensuring that all actors contribute fairly according to their means and historical responsibilities.

Meta-governance—the coordination of governance systems themselves—is equally important. With overlapping institutions, initiatives, and regulatory frameworks at local, national, and international levels, effective meta-governance ensures coherence, avoids duplication, and aligns incentives across scales. It also provides mechanisms for monitoring, accountability, and adaptive management in a complex and rapidly changing global environment.

Through meta-governance, states, international organisations, and societal stakeholders can harmonise efforts, share lessons, and jointly respond to crises. This approach strengthens the global governance architecture, making it more resilient, flexible, and capable of delivering measurable, sustainable development outcomes. The Pocket Guide has illustrated throughout all its chapters the basics for meta-governance as they have emerged over the thirty-year period the guide covers.

What Has the Best Impact: Advocacy vs. Co-Production?

There is ongoing debate about the relative effectiveness of advocacy versus co-production in sustainable and environmental development governance. Advocacy—through campaigns, lobbying, and awareness-raising—can influence political will, mobilise resources, and shape public opinion. It is particularly effective in catalysing urgent action on emerging environmental threats or in holding governments accountable.

Co-production, on the other hand, involves joint problem-solving between governments, Major Groups, and other stakeholder organisations. This approach integrates diverse knowledge systems, fosters innovation, and enhances ownership of solutions, often leading to more sustainable and context-appropriate outcomes. Evidence suggests that combining advocacy to build momentum with co-production to implement solutions achieves the greatest long-term impact. But it is a precondition that all involved actors have the willingness, the mindset and the skills needed to work together. For example, if a stakeholder group has developed the skills to lobby, it has to unlearn these partially and learn how to work on an equal footing with people representing different interests.

Ultimately, governance strategies that are flexible, inclusive, and evidence-based tend to be the most effective. Balancing top-down guidance with bottom-up engagement and linking

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advocacy to co-production strengthens the legitimacy, resilience, and transformative potential of environmental and sustainable development governance.

What we have aimed to illustrate, among others, is that all these elements have played out and will be playing out at the UN and other conferences that deal with governance for the environment and sustainable development.

Will a Strong UNEP Contribute to Enhance Governance?

The concept of a World Environment Organization (WEO) emerged during the late 1990s to address some of the limitations of UNEP. UNEP has always struggled to secure consistent funding and assert comprehensive authority over multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and global environmental policy. Establishing a WEO with universal membership could perhaps provide a larger financial base and position the organisation at the top of the global environmental governance hierarchy. The idea of a World Environment Organization (WEO) has been advanced by scholars and policy advocates seeking to strengthen international environmental governance. Proponents argue that UNEP's mandate, governance structure, and financial base limit its ability to coordinate the fragmented landscape of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). A WEO—envisioned as a fully-fledged specialised agency with universal membership, stable funding, and stronger authority—has been proposed as one possible institutional reform to address these limitations and provide a more coherent and effective global environmental governance structure.

Somme proposal entailed that the WEO would be modelled as a hybrid normative and operational body, similar to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), meeting annually, and supported by an executive body to prepare Council decisions. Its potential roles and mandate could include:

- Representing the authoritative global voice on environmental matters;
- Coordinating environmental policy across the UN system;
- Providing a common framework for implementing and monitoring MEAs, with a shared secretariat for all agreements and subsidiary committees for individual MEAs;
- Guiding the global environmental science agenda and offering technical support to developing countries for monitoring and reporting environmental trends; and
- Establishing norms and standards and delivering evidence-based policy advice.

The WEO idea gained momentum in the 1990s and became a focal point of discussion leading up to the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). In 1997, a Special Session of the UN General Assembly saw Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Brazil's President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, South Africa's Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, and Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong issue a Declaration for a Global Initiative on Sustainable Development, calling for consideration of "the establishment of a global environmental umbrella organisation of the UN with UNEP as a major pillar." The WSSD itself did not resolve the question of a WEO, and debate has continued through the first decades of the 21st century. Perhaps this could be an idea to pursue towards 2030, when the world is to take stock of its future.

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There is Hope in the Decisions We Make

The Pocket Guide begins its overview in the 1990s, but the content is mindful of the more than 40 years of diligent work of the UN family on the environment that precedes the 1990s, and that provides the solid background for decisions made since the 1990s. To paraphrase the polymath and philosopher Sir Isaac Newton, *"If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,"* it could be said that "the solidity and relevance of the Triple Planetary Crisis and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals rest on the shoulders of the gigantic, accumulated knowledge by the UN over the years."

The UN is in the middle of a reform process and working under the mantle of UN80. The Pocket Guide has shown that the UN is too rich to be dismantled in the way that some politicians would like to do. The UN 80 process enables us to look at some of the history of the UN Environment Programme, including sustainable development issues and how to make the UN system more "agile, integrated, and equipped to respond to today's complex global challenges". A historic lens is needed to understand what needs to be taken care of and what can be wisely changed, and it would be wise to see if elements of this history can be resurrected and a debate around them can be reenergized to accomplish the goals of the present reform process. And looking into the annals of UN history, it is evident that UN reform is not a single event responding to global politics, but a continuous process of adaptation and evolution.

In 2004, the Kenyan environmentalist, Wangari Maathai, was awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her "contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace." Working often with UNEP and understanding the need to protect and defend the environment and sustainable development, she said: "When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope." In connection with the UN Summit of the Future, in September 2024, a strong postulation both reflecting Maathai's sentiment and supporting the essence of the UN was expressed: "Without peace, there is no life; Without democracy, there is no freedom; Without nature, there is no future."

The Pocket Guide has attempted to give you a small insight into the work of the UN on the environment and sustainable development. By now, it should be evident that what we have tried to do is to open the door to the vast and ongoing work of the United Nations in the area of environment and sustainable development. If we have managed to crack open this door, we hope that you have been inspired to open it fully, enter the room of environment and sustainable development, and become fully engaged.

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