

The Planetary Future

Saving the Planet: Revitalizing the UN for Our Common Future

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Abstract. In the face of an escalating Anthropocene crisis characterized by climate change and the degradation of Earth's systems, the necessity of a unified global governance framework is paramount. The United Nations, despite its central role in environmental governance and achievements such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals, confronts significant challenges. These challenges include institutional fragmentation, coordination difficulties, and a gap in implementation, which pose obstacles to translating ambitious environmental goals into tangible outcomes. This paper argues that strategic revitalization and structural reforms are crucial for the UN to maintain its pivotal role in global environmental governance. It proposes specific measures to enhance the UN's effectiveness in environmental governance, including transforming the United Nations Environment Program into a Global Environmental Agency, establishing a regulatory framework to improve coordination among Multilateral Environmental Agreements, upgrading the Global Environment Facility, emphasizing environmental stewardship and repurpose of the UN Trusteeship Council. These recommendations aim to address the current institutional challenges and pave the way for more effective global environmental governance.

Keywords: United Nations, global commons, global environment, multilateralism, UN reform, UNEP, UN Trusteeship Council

1. Introduction

Amidst the escalating environmental crisis, marked by the unprecedented impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the degradation of Earth's ecosystems, the imperative for a robust and unified global governance framework has never been more critical. These pressing challenges require reevaluating the international architecture for environmental governance, which is tasked with the monumental responsibility of securing our planet's future. At the forefront of this architecture stands the United Nations (UN), an institution conceived in the aftermath of war, aiming to nurture a more peaceful and safe global community.

Despite its central role in environmental governance and its successes in fostering international dialogue and establishing global agendas, the UN encounters formidable obstacles that impede its effectiveness. The institution's endeavors in climate change mitigation, biodiversity preservation, and sustainable development promotion have witnessed achievements, such as the landmark Paris Agreement and adopting the Sustainable

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Development Goals (SDGs). These achievements exemplify the potential for collective global action. Nonetheless, the UN's efficacy is significantly hampered by fragmentation, coordination challenges, and a substantial gap in implementation, which together pose significant obstacles to transforming ambitious goals into concrete outcomes.

This paper argues that for the UN to maintain its influential position in the global environmental governance landscape, it must undertake strategic revitalization and structural reforms. Through an analysis of historical milestones, existing challenges, and potential solutions, this paper underscores the urgency for collective action. It begins by delineating the critical environmental issues confronting our planet, focusing on biodiversity loss, deforestation, climate destabilization, increasing pollution, and human vulnerability. It then explores the UN's role in establishing the necessary frameworks and agreements to address these challenges. The paper further analyzes key obstacles that hinder the UN's effectiveness in environmental governance, namely institutional fragmentation, coordination challenges, and the implementation deficit. Subsequently, it outlines current needs aimed at revitalizing and reforming the UN and proposes a set of strategic actions to ensure a more effective environmental governance. It concludes with a focus on the needed solutions to achieve immediate action.

2. The Earth's System and the Crisis of the Anthropocene

We live in a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, wherein human activities are the primary drivers of environmental change.¹ In this new era, environmental challenges are precipitated by unsustainable production and consumption patterns and have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. The acceleration of human development threatens to push our planet beyond its limits and further jeopardize the systems that support life on our planet.² Scientists warn of surpassing “planetary boundaries,” which are understood as thresholds within which Earth's processes must operate to maintain the conditions conducive to life and minimize risks associated with environmental degradation.³ These challenges are further exacerbated by rising geopolitical tensions, increasing inequalities, and polarization. Collectively, they threaten to undermine decades of development achievements, derail progress toward the SDGs, and delay the urgent transition towards a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable global society.

The dramatic increase in greenhouse gas emissions, predominantly carbon dioxide and methane from energy production and transportation, has led to an unprecedented rate of global warming since 1970, with temperature increases unmatched in the last 2000 years.⁴ The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) 2023 *Emissions Gap Report*⁵ highlights a record increase to 57.4 gigatons of CO₂ from 2021 to 2022. The report underscores the uneven distribution of emissions across regions, countries, and socio-economic groups, with a 98% likelihood of the next five years setting new records for warmth. This trend threatens to breach the 2015 Paris Agreement's 1.5 degrees Celsius, limit by the early 2030s, escalating the urgency for global climate action. Additionally, the rise in CO₂ levels exacerbates ocean acidification, impairing its CO₂ absorption capacity and further intensifying climate impacts.⁶ This degradation affects human health, contributing to malnutrition, poisoning, and respiratory issues.⁷ Furthermore, air pollution is causing an estimated one in every nine deaths worldwide and is responsible for an estimated seven million premature deaths yearly.⁸

Furthermore, exacerbating this issue, the swift decline of biodiversity is evidenced by the ongoing depletion of genetic variances and species populations, resulting in irrevocable harm. These extinctions signify a depletion

1 P.J. Crutzen and E.F. Stoermer (2000), “The Anthropocene”, *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 : 17-18.

2 V. Galaz (2022), “Global Environmental Governance in Times of Turbulence”, *One Earth*, 5(6): pp. 582-585.

3 E.O. Wilson, et al. (2019), *Biodiversity and Climate Change: Transforming the Biosphere*, Yale University Press.

4 IPCC (2023), *AR6 Synthesis Report: Climate Change 2023*, available at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-cycle/>

5 UNEP (2023), *Emissions Gap Report*; Emissions Gap Report 2023 | UNEP - UN Environment 4.

6 WMO (2023), “Climate Change Undermines Nearly all Sustainable Development Goals”, *World Meteorological Organization*, 14 November 2023, available at: <https://wmo.int/media/news/climate-change-undermines-nearly-all-sustainable-development-goals>

7 L.J. Falkenberg et al. (2020), “Ocean Acidification and Human Health”, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(12).

8 UNEP (2021), “Pollution Action Note – Data You Need to Know”, available at: <https://www.unep.org/interactives/air-pollution-note/>

of invaluable ecological patrimony and a pressing challenge to the prospects of life on Earth.⁹ Human activities have also drastically altered terrestrial and marine environments; three-quarters of land-based environments and 66% percent of the marine environment have been significantly changed. One million species face the threat of extinction. The massive production of 8.3 billion tons of plastic since the 1950s has impacted both terrestrial and marine environments.¹⁰

In the past thirty years, 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land use.¹¹ Deforestation is directly linked to altering local temperatures, leading to higher temperatures for humans and significantly impacting their well-being in various ways.¹² One example is soil quality, whereby deforestation threatens the productivity of the soil and ecosystems that serve human needs.¹³ Another example relates to the transmission of pathogens – deforestation creates new vectors for the spread of pathogens and plays a major detrimental role in the health and well-being of local and global populations.¹⁴

The global food crisis, displacement due to climate events, and the exacerbation of conflicts and inequalities further illustrate the varied impacts of climate change. Between 3.3 and 3.6 billion people live in areas vulnerable to climate events,¹⁵ where populations suffer aggravated food insecurity, water scarcity, and resource competition. In 2023, acute food insecurity hit record levels in 48 countries, affecting 238 million people – a 10% increase from 2022. The past decade saw the number of forcibly displaced people double, with 84% of refugees in 2022 coming from climate-vulnerable countries.¹⁶ Disasters in 2022 led to a record 32.6 million internal displacements, 98% originated from weather-related hazards.¹⁷ Violent conflicts and political instability also exacerbate this situation. Currently, over 2 billion people reside in conflict-affected areas, a figure at an all-time high.¹⁸

This situation creates a cycle that worsens inequalities, hitting the poorest and most vulnerable communities hardest. Women and girls bear increased risks and burdens. UN Women reports that climate-related challenges are driving an additional 150 million people into poverty and worsening hunger for another 236 million.¹⁹ Indigenous communities also suffer disproportionately from climate change effects, including forced relocations, health issues, and poverty. Although 40% of land occupied by Indigenous peoples lies in high-biodiversity areas, their stewardship is marred by poverty rates significantly above the global average.²⁰

Addressing the crisis of the Anthropocene requires a unified global effort aimed at mitigating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and promoting sustainable resource use. Overcoming the significant political, economic, and technological hurdles to stabilize the Earth's climate calls for a major economic overhaul that requires

- 9 J. Rockström et al. (2009), "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity", *Ecology and Society*, 14(2).
- 10 See also M.F. Espinosa (2024), "Transformative Shifts for a New Global Environmental Governance", in R. Falk & A. Lopez-Claros (eds.), *Global Governance and International Cooperation: Managing Global Catastrophic Risks in the 21st Century*, Routledge India, pp. 348-371.
- 11 UNEP (2020), "The State of the World's Forests: Forests, Biodiversity and People", available at: <https://www.unep.org/resources/state-worlds-forests-forests-biodiversity-and-people>
- 12 N.H. Wolff et al. (2018), "Impacts of Tropical Deforestation on Local Temperature and Human Well-Being Perceptions", *Global Environmental Change*, 52: pp. 181-189.
- 13 E. Amoakwah et al. (2021), "Impact of Deforestation and Subsequent Land-Use Change on Soil Quality", *Eurasian Journal of Soil Science*, 10 : 150-160.
- 14 J.H. Ellwanger et al. (2020), "Beyond Diversity Loss and Climate Change: Impacts of Amazon Deforestation on Infectious Diseases and Public Health", *Anais da Academia Brasileira de Ciencias*, 92(1).
- 15 IPCC (2023), n.4.
- 16 UNHCR (2017), Climate Change and Disaster Displacement: An Overview of UNHCR's role, available at: Climate Change and Disaster Displacement: An Overview of UNHCR's role; UNHCR
- 17 International Displacement Monitoring Centre (2023), *2023 Global Report on Internal Displacement*, available at: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2023/>
- 18 UN (2023), "With Highest Number of Violent Conflicts Since Second World War, United Nations Must Rethink Efforts to Achieve, Sustain Peace, Speakers Tell Security Council", *UN Meetings Coverage*, 26 January 2023, available at: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm>
- 19 UN Women (2023), "As Climate Change Pushes Millions of Women Into Poverty, UN Women Calls for a New Feminist Climate Justice Approach", *UN Women Press Release*, 4 December 2023, available at: As climate change pushes millions of women into poverty, UN Women calls for a new feminist climate justice approach | UN Women – Headquarters.
- 20 World Bank (n.d). *Indigenous Peoples Policy Brief 64760: Still Among the Poorest of the Poor*, The World Bank, available at: World Bank Document

increased solidarity and collaboration.²¹ Such stabilization hinges on a global transformation that is science-driven, innovation-fueled, and policy-coordinated. Despite global efforts, current trends forecast a bleak future for our planet. The existing framework of global environmental governance is insufficient to combat these challenges. As we shift focus to the United Nations' role in this arena, it is clear that revitalizing and addressing the shortcomings of this framework is essential.

3. Role of the UN in Global Environmental Governance

The UN plays a pivotal role in global governance. Its charter sets forth the organization's core principles, purposes, and structure. It aims to maintain international peace and security, promote friendly relations among nations, and facilitate international cooperation in solving global issues. The UN also emphasizes multilateral approaches to problem-solving and serves as a platform for developing norms, policies, and initiatives that promote human progress and mutual development.²² In the domain of environmental challenges, the UN has emerged as a central actor that shapes global responses and fosters collaborative action.

One leading institution within the UN structure is the UNEP, which is considered the "global environmental authority".²³ Founded after the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment,²⁴ it promotes solutions to climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. One example of a successful convening of global actors was the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer, which was adopted in 1985 and addressed the depletion of the ozone layer in the Earth's stratosphere. It served as a framework agreement for specific obligations that became known as the Montreal Protocol, which is widely considered one of the most successful environmental agreements. It set specific targets for phasing out the production and consumption of ozone-depleting chemicals, such as chlorofluorocarbons. During the series of negotiations that led to these agreements, the UNEP provided critical support, which included assistance in implementation, facilitating the exchange of information, and the mobilization of resources for developing countries to meet their obligations.

The 1992 Rio Conference, held in Rio de Janeiro, marked another pivotal moment in global environmental governance. It emphasized the concept of sustainable development and advocated for a balance between meeting current needs without jeopardizing future generations' abilities to meet theirs.²⁵ Additionally, the Rio Conference laid the foundation for key multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs),²⁶ including the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).²⁷ The UNFCCC serves as a pivotal framework specifically designed to address the challenges posed by the emission of greenhouse gases (GHGs). In contrast to the broader environmental scope of the UNEP, the UNFCCC concentrates its efforts on the mitigation of climate change and the promotion of international collaboration to tackle both the causes and effects of global warming. Its core objective is "stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system . . . within a time frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change".²⁸

One of the critical efforts of the UN's efforts in global environmental governance is the Conference of Parties (COP), which was conceived as the supreme decision-making body of the UNFCCC. First convened in Berlin

21 UNDP (2022), "New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene Demanding Greater Solidarity", available at: <https://hs.hdr.undp.org/pdf/srhs2022.pdf>

22 S. Dutt, (2012). "The UN and Global Governance: Do Ideas Alone Help?", *India Quarterly*, 68(2): 187-194.

23 For a detailed study of UNEP, see Bharat H. Desai (2006), "UNEP: A Global Environmental Authority?", *Environmental Policy and Law*, 36(3-4), 137-157.

24 UN (1972), *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, Stockholm, 5–16 June 1972; United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm 1972 | United Nations.

25 P. Robbins (2007), "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development", in *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society*, SAGE Publications, pp. 1513-1514.

26 For a detailed study of MEAs, see Bharat H. Desai (2010, 2013), *Multilateral Environmental Agreements: Legal Status of the Secretariats*. Cambridge: CUP; [crio.pdf \(cambridge.org\)](http://crio.pdf.cambridge.org).

27 UNFCCC (1992), "United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change", United Nations, New York, 9 May 1992, available at: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/conveng.pdf>

28 *Ibid*, Article 2.

in 1995, COP illustrates the UN's commitment to facilitating international collaboration and setting concrete, actionable goals. During the third COP, hosted in Kyoto in 1997, a landmark agreement was adopted. It set binding obligations on participating nations to reduce GHGs by an average of 5% below 1990 levels. It introduced a system of differentiated responsibilities and flexible market mechanisms to achieve these targets for 192 member-states.²⁹

A subsidiary accord, the 2015 Paris Agreement agreed during UNFCCC COP21, represented a significant evolution of this framework.³⁰ Designed to succeed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, it broadened the responsibility for emissions reduction to include both developed and developing nations. It ambitiously aims to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, to pursue efforts to keep the temperature below 1.5 degrees Celsius and enhance countries' capabilities to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change. Additionally, each Party must prepare, communicate, and maintain successive Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC).

The NDCs are the primary means by which countries outline their post-2020 climate action plans. These commitments are pivotal, requiring each nation to set, communicate, and periodically enhance its climate targets. This approach allows for alignment with individual national circumstances and capacities while collectively advancing towards the overarching goal of curbing global temperature increase. The Paris Agreement also innovated with the 'ratchet mechanism,' obligating countries to submit new or updated NDCs every five years. This cycle ensures that each successive NDC ambitiously extends beyond its predecessor's scope. Additionally, a critical component of this iterative process is the global stocktake, conducted every five years to evaluate worldwide progress toward long-term climate goals.

Progress under the Paris Agreement has faced notable challenges in consensus-building among nations, as evidenced in the series of COP meetings since 2018. COP24, held in Katowice, Poland, was characterized by difficulties in fostering agreement on key issues, including enhancing current emission reduction commitments, bolstering financial support for developing nations, clarifying measures to prevent double counting of emissions reductions, and determining the necessity for nations to intensify their emission curtailment pledges. The following year, COP25 continued this trend of indecision, especially failing to secure decisive action on the rules governing carbon markets and further emission cutbacks. The Glasgow Climate Pact at COP26 in 2021 notably stopped short of introducing a mandatory mechanism for finance addressing loss and damage and witnessed substantial resistance to phasing out fossil fuels—tempering the initial call for a 'phase-out' to a 'phase down' of such fuels. COP27, conducted in 2022 in Sharm El Sheikh, presented a symbolic 'loss and damage' fund for developing countries yet fell short of making concrete commitments. It notably sidestepped the urgent issue of fossil fuel reduction.

The culmination of international efforts under the UN's auspices to combat climate change was marked by the first Global Stocktake at Dubai COP28.³¹ This established a unified direction for future climate action and set the stage to inform the subsequent round of NDCs due in 2025.³² Significantly, COP28's final declaration, dubbed 'the UAE consensus,' for the first time in the thirty-year history of COP meetings, explicitly called for a transition away from fossil fuels and reiterated the imperative to achieve net-zero CO₂ emissions by 2030.³³

Parallel to these climate-centric initiatives, the United Nations has spearheaded broader Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These emerged from a growing recognition that a more comprehensive framework was needed to address economic, social, and environmental challenges that intersected with and aggravated one another. Launched in 2000, the Millennium Development Goals were further expanded into the Sustainable Development Goals³⁴ by 2015, setting an ambitious target for achievement by the year 2030.

29 UNFCCC (1998), *Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*, United Nations, Kyoto, 11 December 1997, available at: <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/convkp/kpeng.pdf>

30 UN (2015), *Paris Agreement*, available at: Paris Agreement text English (unfccc.int).

31 Bharat H. Desai (2023), "Averting the Climate Change Catastrophe @COP28 and Beyond: A Wake-up Call by the UN Secretary-General", *EPL Blog*, December 4; Averting the Climate Change Catastrophe @COP28 and Beyond: A Wake-up Call by the UN Secretary-General | Environmental Policy and Law.

32 UNFCCC (2023), *Global Stocktake*, available at: Global Stocktake | UNFCCC.

33 COP28 (2023), *The UAE Consensus*, available at: COP28 UAE | COP28 delivers historic consensus in Dubai to accelerate climate action

34 UN (2015), *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*; General Assembly resolution 70/1 of General Assembly on 25 September 2015; Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: (un.org)

Embraced by all UN member states, these 17 goals and their 169 targets include climate action and environmental protection linked with broader economic and social objectives reflecting an integrated approach to tackling the multifaceted challenges of sustainable development.³⁵ The SDGs have been integrated into the work of the UNFCCC and the COP and reflect efforts to consolidate a system of knowledge, collaboration, and governance. This 2030 Agenda is considered the roadmap for addressing and overcoming these challenges.

In recognizing the critical intersection of environmental governance and human rights, the UN bodies have taken further steps toward institutionalizing the right to a healthy, clean, and sustainable environment. Notably, the UN General Assembly's resolution "Towards a Global Pact for the Environment" initiated in 2018 aimed at forging a legally binding treaty on international environmental law, although negotiations are ongoing.³⁶ This period also saw the adoption of resolutions recognizing environmental protection as a human right, further entrenching the environment within the global human rights agenda, as illustrated by Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 of 2021 and UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/76/300 in 2022.³⁷

According to the International Environmental Agreements Database Project, currently, there are over 3,700 international environmental agreements, including over 1,400 MEAs and 2,200 bilateral agreements.³⁸ These agreements, developed through comprehensive processes from environmental assessments to ratification, have constructed an unprecedented framework for global environmental governance. While the MEAs symbolize the international community's commitment to collaborative environmental stewardship, the overarching system of global environmental governance continues to face challenges in fully addressing the urgent and interconnected issues of climate change and environmental degradation.

4. Challenges of the UN in Global Environmental Governance

Global governance represents the constellation of institutions dedicated to addressing international challenges, a system integral to managing global environmental issues (Biermann et al., 2009). However, the effectiveness of this global environmental governance framework is significantly compromised by its very structure. The transition from merely recognizing the need for global cooperation to actually developing a robust and resilient cooperative framework is fraught with difficulties. This transition is notably impeded by escalating distrust and divisions among nations, exacerbated by challenges including rising global violence, the proliferation of new state and non-state actors on the international stage, and the looming specter of nuclear threats. These conditions not only undermine efforts toward cohesive global governance but also contribute to a deteriorating international climate conducive to collective action.³⁹ The prevailing fragmentation of efforts, coordination challenges among a diverse array of actors, and a notable deficit in implementation have emerged as the principal barriers to effective global environmental governance.

(i) Fragmentation

The UN system is characterized by the existence of multiple agencies, programs, and treaties with overlapping mandates on climate change, which significantly complicates the landscape of global environmental governance. This fragmentation not only increases systemic complexity but also impedes effective coordination, leading to duplication of efforts and inefficient use of resources. The presence of overlapping institutions and conflicting goals exacerbates these challenges, resulting in diminished accountability and transparency. Such conditions may precipitate organizational stagnation or, in the worst cases, jeopardize the very objectives the UN aims to achieve.

35 *Ibid*; *The 17 Goals*, available at: THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development (un.org)

36 UN (2018), *Towards a Global Pact for the Environment*, General Assembly Resolution A/72/L.51, New York, 10 May 2018, available at: [Towards a Global Pact for the Environment: \(un.org\)](#)

37 UN (2021), *The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment*, Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 of 8 October 2021, available at: [The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment: \(un.org\)](#); UN (2022), *The Human Right to a Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment*, General Assembly resolution 76/300 of 28 July 2022, available at: [A/RES/76/300 \(undocs.org\)](#)

38 University of Oregon (2020), "International Environmental Agreements (IEA) Database Project", available at: <https://iea.uoregon.edu/>

39 S. Saran and D. Quah (2024), "Climate Rethinking Climate Governance", in *Shaping Cooperation in a Fragmenting World*, World Economic Forum.

For instance, the UNEP's intended role as the cornerstone for global environmental initiatives has been diluted by the emergence of the numerous MEAs, which scatter authority and divert resources. This issue is compounded when the goals of major frameworks, such as the 1992 UNFCCC, the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, and the 1994 UN Convention to Combat Desertification, overlap. The resultant duplication, particularly evident in financing through mechanisms like the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the UN Development Program's involvement in environmental projects, undermines the efficacy of collective action.

The competition for financial backing, technical expertise, and political support further deepens fragmentation. From the UNEP to the GEF, entities vie for limited resources, fostering inefficiencies and redundancy. Additionally, the Kyoto Protocol's distinct treatment of developed and developing nations introduced operational fragmentation by setting disparate emission reduction targets. Meanwhile, the Paris Agreement's reliance on NDCs risks engendering a patchwork of individual commitments, potentially detracting from a cohesive and ambitious global strategy. This landscape of fragmentation challenges the unity, coherence, and ambition necessary for effective global climate action.

(ii) Coordination challenges

Coordination challenges within the UN system, exacerbated by fragmentation, pose significant hurdles to the global response to climate change. The UN's consensus-based model, designed to promote inclusivity and democratic decision-making, paradoxically contributes to these challenges. This model's requirement for unanimous agreement often stalls rapid and decisive action, a critical impediment in the urgent fight against climate change. The difficulty is particularly pronounced given the veto power in the Security Council and resistance from major greenhouse gas emitters in climate negotiations, which can significantly slow progress or weaken the ambitions of crucial agreements.

The divergent perspectives of member states on climate change further complicate coordination efforts. Variations in environmental prioritization and the disparate impacts of climate change across regions underline the complexity of reaching consensus on international climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement. The negotiation process reveals deep-seated debates over responsibility and equity. Developing countries point to the historical GHG emissions of industrialized nations, arguing that they should not bear the burden of past actions. Meanwhile, developed countries counter that emerging economies are rapidly approaching or surpassing the historical emission levels of industrialized nations, especially when considering current annual emissions.

This debate extends to production-linked emissions versus consumption-linked emissions, adding another layer of complexity to the negotiations and further complicating the distribution of costs and benefits associated with mitigating climate change. Such complexities highlight the broader issue of consensus decision-making within the UN framework, where divergent interests and priorities make it challenging to reach agreements on a multitude of issues. Addressing this systemic challenge requires innovative approaches to enhance coordination and streamline decision-making processes, ensuring that the global response to climate change is both inclusive and effective.

(iii) Implementation deficit

The UN's effectiveness in combatting climate change is critically undermined by an implementation deficit, a gap most apparent in the domains of delivery, performance, and compliance. This shortfall stems from the reliance on voluntary commitments and the expectation of international peer pressure to drive national actions, an approach that lacks the power necessary for achieving the required scale and urgency of emissions reductions. The Paris Agreement illustrates this challenge vividly: while it outlines ambitious NDCs for countries, it operates without compulsory enforcement mechanisms. The framework places responsibility squarely on national governments for compliance, relying on a self-accountability model without the leverage of external authority or legal compulsion. This lack of enforceable mechanisms renders the adherence to climate commitments both politically delicate and operationally difficult.

Further exacerbating the issue is the insufficient legislative and institutional capacity within many countries to effectively implement agreed-upon climate actions. The absence of strong enforcement tools within the UN's climate governance architecture means that the realization of global climate objectives is heavily dependent on the political will and infrastructural capabilities of individual states. Without the capacity to enforce action or ensure accountability, the NDCs face significant hurdles in converting global agreements into tangible, impactful results.

In sum, the challenges of fragmentation, coordination, and an implementation deficit in the UN's approach to global environmental governance are deeply interlinked, hindering effective action against climate change. Addressing these barriers is essential for transforming the governance framework into a more effective system for tackling environmental and climate challenges.

5. The road ahead: Approaches to revitalization of the UN

The global climate crisis, alongside issues like renewable energy transition, peace, security, and ecosystem preservation, clearly exceeds national capabilities and borders. Existing global governance frameworks, reliant on consensus and voluntary actions, fall short of averting environmental catastrophes (Global Governance Forum, 2023). The Our Common Agenda (OCA) report, introduced by Secretary-General António Guterres in 2021, advocates for a renewed approach to global cooperation to address these and other challenges. It underscores the importance of global solidarity, a reinvigorated social contract that respects human rights, effective management of shared resources, and equitable access to global public goods, including healthcare, clean energy, and technology. The OCA emphasizes protecting global commons crucial for climate action, such as the high seas, atmosphere, Antarctica, and outer space.

To reinvigorate multilateralism, the OCA called for a Summit of the Future in September 2024, which will result in an action-focused “Pact of the Future” expected to be agreed upon by Member States. This pact will serve as a compass and roadmap to reimagine multilateralism to better address the great grievances of our time, including the ecological crisis. Despite some progress through MEAs, hurdles in transforming commitments into policy and action persist. No country can tackle these global challenges alone. Overcoming fragmentation, coordination difficulties, and addressing the implementation deficit are crucial for effectively tackling environmental challenges. Fostering collective action and cooperation among nations is a crucial element.⁴⁰ To achieve it, we need upgraded global institutions, policy and normative frameworks, and justice systems to be equipped to govern the environmental commons. As detailed below, we need:

(i) *Renewed UN Charter that includes the Earth's System*

The UN, as it stands, is anchored upon four fundamental pillars: peace and security, human rights, the rule of law, and development. One glaring omission in the UN Charter is its lack of environmental mention. In 1945, when the UN Charter was established, environmental degradation was not recognized as a critical issue. However, today, we are confronted with multiple environmental crises that have escalated into existential threats on a global scale, jeopardizing fundamental human needs like food, water, and shelter. These crises, deeply intertwined within the Earth's system, are catalysts for instability and conflict, exacerbating competition for essential resources such as fresh water and arable land and driving mass migrations on an unprecedented scale.⁴¹

However, the biggest governance gap is at the global level, where MEAs face a chronic implementation deficit and weak enforcement mechanisms. This has led to growing advocacy for convening a Charter Review Conference, as outlined in Article 109 of the UN Charter, to revise the UN system to address present challenges more effectively. Considering the escalating environmental challenges, a revised UN Charter should introduce a fifth pillar dedicated to the Earth System. It should expand the scope of global governance to effectively address these environmental challenges.⁴² The Summit of the Future presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to pave the way for this reform.

(ii) *Restructured UN Bodies*

In the context of a revised UN Charter, there is an urgent need for integrated global governance approaches to address these multifaceted environmental challenges comprehensively. The UN General Assembly (GA) is an important element of this restructuring. Often referred to as the “Parliament of the World's Nations,” the GA stands out for its inclusive nature, treating all Member States as equals regardless of their demographic or

40 M.F. Espinosa (2024). “Transformative Shifts for a New Global Environmental Governance”, in R. Falk & A. Lopez-Claros (Eds.), *Global Governance and International Cooperation: Managing Global Catastrophic Risks in the 21st Century*, Routledge India, pp. 348-371.

41 Global Governance Forum (2023). “A Second Charter: Imagining a Renewed United Nations”, available at: https://globalgovernanceforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/SecondCharter_Imagining-Renewed-United-Nations.pdf

42 *Ibid.*

economic status. The GA has demonstrated its significance in tackling pressing global issues, notably stepping in during a prolonged deadlock in the Security Council (SC) over a COVID-19 resolution and leading the response with the World Health Organization and the broader international community. Similarly, in response to the Ukraine war, the GA took a leadership role by adopting a landmark resolution led by Liechtenstein, marking a significant affirmation of its central role in global governance. This Resolution, titled “Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council” (document A/76/L.52), seeks to ensure that the P5 members are accountable for their vetoes by requiring them to justify their decisions to the GA. Thus, enhancing the powers of the GA positions the UN to address worldwide concerns more promptly and inclusively.

Additionally, there is a widespread call for the reform of the Security Council both in its membership and in its working methods to avoid the frequent deadlock when addressing critical peace and security issues. This is increasingly important as climate change is recognized as a significant factor contributing to these challenges. Equally important is addressing the UN’s institutional fragmentation. This involves harmonizing the efforts and unifying the perspectives of programs and agencies like UNEP, UNDP, and FAO, often with overlapping mandates and weak coordination. Closing the implementation gap to translate policy frameworks into concrete outcomes is critical. Future frameworks must possess the flexibility to adapt to the varied national circumstances and governance systems present today while also allowing for their evolution.⁴³ Enhancing the UN’s legitimacy hinges on improving its accountability and inclusivity. This is vital for strengthening the effectiveness of its decision-making and ensuring its position as a legitimate and authoritative global governance body.

(iii) A well-funded UN system

Significant economic resources are essential to address the current challenges and effectively achieve the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. The most recent Financing the UN Development System Report revealed that the UN revenue was \$6.2 billion in 2021 and identified four primary funding sources, with earmarked contributions and assessed contributions being the most crucial.⁴⁴ According to the report, this financial commitment is instrumental in updating the 2030 Agenda and securing a just green transition by prompting the channeling of resources to build resilience, mitigate risks, and prevent crises and armed conflicts. It also advocates for the augmentation of both public and private financial flows, the strategic use of domestic funds, a threefold increase in concessional finance by 2030, and a reevaluation of the functions of multilateral development banks.⁴⁵

Beyond these contributions, a stable and well-funded budget is necessary for the UN system to effectively address these pressing global issues. This requires a reliable financing mechanism, potentially including a global UN tax and assessed contributions from member states. The current reliance on earmarked, issue-specific funding poses limitations to the UN’s flexibility and responsiveness to emerging global challenges. By significantly reducing dependence on such targeted funding, the UN can ensure a more predictable and comprehensive financial foundation. This shift towards a stable financing model will not only bolster the UN’s capacity to meet current and future challenges but also enhance its role in driving global efforts towards sustainable development and climate action.

6. Actions to revitalize the UN

Building on the imperative needs outlined in the previous section, four essential solutions are proposed to revitalize the UN for a common future: transforming UNEP into a Global Environmental Agency, establishing a regulatory framework for better coordination among MEAs, improving and upgrading the GEF, and prioritizing environmental stewardship and subsidiarity in governance.

(i) A Global Environmental Agency

43 Global Governance Forum (2023). *A Second Charter. Imagining a Renewed United Nations*, available at: [SecondCharter_Imagining-Renewed-United-Nations.pdf](https://www.globalgovernanceforum.org/SecondCharter_Imagining-Renewed-United-Nations.pdf) (globalgovernanceforum.org)

44 UN (2023), *Financing the UN Development System: Choices in Uncertain Times*; Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, available at: <https://financingun.report/>

45 A. Bhattacharya et al. (2023), *A Climate Finance Framework: Decisive Action to Deliver on the Paris Agreement – Summary*. London: Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, London School of Economics and Political Science.

Different actors have advocated for establishing a singular, centralized entity dedicated exclusively to environmental governance, proposing the upgrade of the UNEP into a Global Environmental Agency.⁴⁶ This entity would possess regulatory and monitoring powers, significantly enhancing its capacity to coordinate the UN system's work on the environment. As a more potent successor to the UNEP, it would have binding, supranational authority to facilitate the Earth's system's effective, integrated, equitable, and accountable governance. Endowed with the capacity to mobilize critical resources, this agency would consolidate international environmental efforts under a unified framework. This suggestion aligns with the recommendations found in the OCA report, which advocates repurposing of the UN Trusteeship Council.⁴⁷ The Council, one of the UN's principal organs, would be tasked with overseeing global public goods and ensuring intergenerational justice.

The UN could significantly address fragmentation, coordination challenges, and the implementation deficit by establishing such an agency. This centralized entity would streamline efforts across various environmental initiatives, ensuring coherent policy-making, facilitating decisive action, and enhancing the execution of international environmental agreements. Despite the apparent urgency and the broad-based support for establishing a global body that governs and protects our planetary boundaries, significant hurdles remain. The transformation requires the approval of two-thirds of UN member states, including all P5 members of the Security Council.⁴⁸ However, while the concept of a single environmental agency is not novel, it currently lacks a formal proposal undergoing procedural consideration.

(ii) *Regulatory Framework*

To enhance the coherence and coordination among major MEAs, there is a pressing need to establish a mechanism or regulatory framework. This involves reigniting discussions around the zero draft of the *Pact for the Future*,⁴⁹ which remains under negotiation. This pact, envisioned as a treaty to delineate new rights and responsibilities for both individuals and governments regarding environmental protection, emerged from an initiative by international environmental law experts in 2017. It aims to establish a comprehensive legal framework that addresses existing gaps in international environmental law, enhancing the enforcement of current environmental agreements to mitigate the implementation deficit.

As envisioned by the Global Pact, a regulatory framework would underscore fundamental environmental rights, such as the right to a healthy environment, and outline the obligations of nations to protect these rights, thereby fostering improved coordination and reducing fragmentation among MEAs. This framework is designed not only to strengthen the legal underpinnings of environmental protection but also to empower individuals with more robust mechanisms for holding governments accountable for their environmental obligations. By consolidating environmental laws and principles into a singular, overarching framework, the initiative seeks to create a more unified and effective global environmental governance structure, paving the way for a more sustainable and equitable future.

(iii) *Upgrading the GEF*

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) needs to be recapitalized, demand-driven, and accessible. The GEF is pivotal in providing financial support to developing countries to combat environmental issues. As a cornerstone

46 Bharat H. Desai (2012), "The Quest for a United Nations Specialized Agency for the Environment", *The Roundtable* (Routledge, London), 101(2): pp. 167-179; *The Quest for a United Nations Specialised Agency for the Environment: The Round Table: Vol 101, No 2* (tandfonline.com). Also see, Bharat H. Desai (2006), "UNEP: A Global Environmental Authority?" *Environmental Policy and Law*, 36(3-4): pp. 137-157. Also see, Bharat H. Desai (2000), "Revitalizing International Environmental Institutions: The UN Task Force Report and Beyond", *Indian Journal of International Law*, 40(3): pp. 455-504.

47 Bharat H. Desai (2022), "The Repurposed UN Trusteeship Council for the Future", *Environmental Policy and Law*, 52: 223-235; DOI 10.3233/EPL-219039; epl219039 (iospress.com). Also see, Bharat H. Desai (2000), "Revitalizing International Environmental Institutions: The UN Task Force Report and Beyond", *Indian Journal of International Law*, 40(3): pp. 455-504.

48 M.F. Espinosa (2024), "Transformative Shifts for a New Global Environmental Governance" in R. Falk and A. Lopez-Claros (Eds.), *Global Governance and International Cooperation: Managing Global Catastrophic Risks in the 21st Century*, Routledge, pp. 348-371; *Global Governance and International Cooperation* | (taylorfrancis.com). Also see, Bharat H. Desai (2024), "Intergovernmental Negotiations: G4 Model for Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council and Beyond", *School of International Studies Blog*, 22 March 2024; *Intergovernmental Negotiations: G4 Model for Permanent Membership of the UN Security Council and Beyond* (sisblogjnu.wixsite.com)

49 UN (2024), *Zero Draft of the Pact for the Future*, Summit of the Future, New York, 22–23 September 2024; Summit of the Future website | United Nations; zero-draft_pact-for-the-future.pdf (un.org)

of financial support for developing countries addressing environmental challenges, the GEF is set to embark on a significant phase in 2024, deliberating over decisions on more than \$1 billion in funding across key areas such as climate change adaptation, biodiversity, ocean health, and pollution control. This includes considering a \$916 million work program – one of the largest in its history – alongside \$203 million from the Least Developed Countries Fund and Special Climate Change Fund.⁵⁰ However, the current level of funding falls short of meeting the extensive environmental needs faced globally.

To bridge the funding gap, it is essential to explore avenues for mobilizing additional resources, which could involve increasing contributions from current members or attracting new donors. Enhancing the GEF's engagement with the private sector represents a promising opportunity to tap into their resources and expertise, thereby amplifying the impact of environmental solutions. Additionally, the independent operation of the GEF from other UN bodies underscores a broader issue of resource fragmentation, leading to challenges such as overlapping funding and increased transaction costs. Addressing these issues by streamlining the GEF's operations and funding mechanisms can significantly reduce inefficiencies, making environmental funding more coherent and impactful. By expanding its collaborations beyond governments and NGOs to include more private sector partnerships, the GEF could leverage additional investments and innovations in environmental projects. Such strategic improvements would not only enhance the GEF's capacity to meet the growing demand for environmental financing but also contribute to the broader goal of cohesive and effective global environmental governance.

(iv) Environmental Stewardship and Subsidiarity

There is a crucial need to build a new consensus that transcends governmental and institutional limits, embedding the principles of environmental stewardship and subsidiarity deep within societal norms and individual actions. Environmental stewardship embodies the responsible management and safeguarding of our natural world through collective efforts – from individual citizens to large organizations – toward conservation and sustainable living. This paradigm shift calls for reimagining economic models to value ecological integrity and human well-being, promoting practices that reduce carbon footprints, and championing sustainable technologies and food systems. Central to this new ethos is the recognition of environmental protection as a shared responsibility that goes beyond national boundaries, advocating for a unified global response to environmental challenges.

Underpinning this collaborative effort is the principle of subsidiarity, which advocates for decisions to be made at the most immediate level affecting those involved. Local decisions are closely connected to broader national and international frameworks, reflecting a complex multilevel context that influences governance and autonomy at various jurisdictional levels.⁵¹ This interdependence, along with disparate access to resources and policy tools, creates a varied landscape of governance capacities and necessitates tailored approaches to climate change governance across different countries. This approach also necessitates a governance model that is inclusive and empowers women, girls, and Indigenous peoples, ensuring that environmental policies are equitable and address the needs of all. This inclusive and layered approach is vital for addressing interconnected environmental crises such as global water cycle disruption, biodiversity loss, and climate change with comprehensive solutions that consider social, economic, and ecological dimensions.

7. Conclusion

The environmental crisis we face is a complex and multifaceted challenge that demands a coordinated and effective global response. With its unique power to convene and establish an international cooperation framework, the UN has the potential to play a more pivotal role in addressing the climate crisis and major environmental challenges. However, as stated throughout this paper, the UN's current approach and structure are hindered by

50 GEF (2024), "GEF Family of Funds Set for Ambitious Investments in Nature", available at: <https://www.thegef.org/newsroom/news/gef-family-funds-set-ambitious-investments-nature>

51 P.F. Steinberg (2015), *Who Rules the Earth? How Social Rules Shape Our Planet and Our Lives*. Oxford; Oxford University Press. Also see book review by Heike Schroeder in *Global Environmental Politics* (2016) 16(4): 136-137; Steinberg, Paul. 2015. *Who Rules the Earth? How Social Rules Shape Our Planet and Our Lives* | *Global Environmental Politics* | MIT Press.

fragmentation and coordination problems within its working bodies, current frameworks, and among its members as well as by a shortage in implementation.

To ensure a sustainable future for our planet and its inhabitants, it is imperative to revitalize and reform the UN's environmental governance mechanisms. This requires a multi-pronged approach that emphasizes the strategic integration of proposed solutions – ranging from institutional transformation to enhanced global cooperation and resource optimization – to effectively address the pressing challenges of our time. Upcoming convenings, including the Summit of the Future, COP29 and COP30, and the 2025 Social Summit, represent an opportunity to pave the way to a more efficient and effective UN capable of addressing the current environmental challenges.

The urgency of the environmental crisis cannot be overstated. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation pose existential threats to human societies and the natural world. A unified and urgent response from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector is imperative to enhance the UN's capability to confront these issues effectively. The survival of our planet hinges on our shared commitment to collaboration and sustainable development. By revitalizing the UN and equipping it with the structures, tools, and resources necessary to address the environmental crisis, we can collectively safeguard our common future and ensure a healthy and vibrant planet for generations to come.