State of Global Environmental Governance 2023

International Institute for Sustainable Development

Earth Negotiations Bulletin

IISD
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Edited by Jen Allan, PhD
Contributing authors:
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Earth Negotiations Bulletin

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State of Global Environmental Governance 2023

March 2024

Edited by Jen Allan, PhD
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Cover Photo: Mike Muzurakis

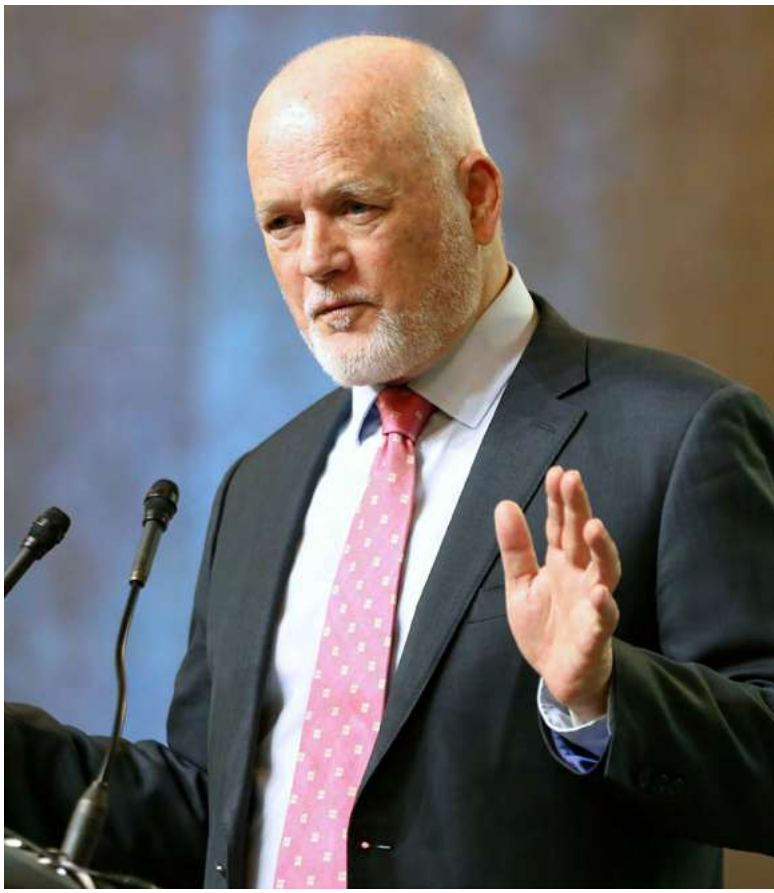
Photo Credits: Mike Muzurakis, Kiara Worth, and Anastasia Rodopoulou

Foreword

At the end of 2023, I wrote these words in an article for TIME magazine, "Over the last two years, a positive wave of ocean action has been sweeping around the planet. It is a wave upon which hope can ride with growing confidence. Its momentum is the most powerful opportunity we have to improve humanity's relationship with the ocean."

Why is it incumbent upon us to improve that relationship? For the answer to that question, we need only repeat the daily mantra: "there can be no healthy planet without a healthy ocean, and the ocean's health is currently measurably in decline." Let us presume we're all moderately aware of the elements of the decline that we're measuring, be it warming, acidification, pollution, harmful fisheries practices, rising sea levels, death of coral … the list goes on. The incumbent demand arises from the fact that, in the main, all of these elements of decline are caused by the activities of humankind.

And then, what is that positive wave, and how can we join with hope in riding it? Well, who would have thought that at a time when international political relations have been at such a cyclical low, that international consensus has been achieved on some truly transformational environmental measures. Let's look at just three of those consensus agreements.



Ambassador Peter Thomson, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean (IISD/ENB | Anastasia Rodopoulou)

Firstly, the high seas treaty, or BBNJ, agreed to at the UN last year, covers 50% of the planet's surface and brings to the ocean the promise of good governance, with sustainability, conservation, and equity at the fore. Before that, from the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)'s 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15), came the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which amongst many game-changing environmental targets, provides for protection of 30% of the planet by 2030. And then we witnessed the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC COP 28) in Dubai agree we must all now transition away from the burning of fossil fuels and triple our investments in renewable energy.

To keep the momentum of this wave rolling through troubled times, we need to pay attention to what individuals and organizations can do through our various competencies and networks. Two good examples would be that the "high seas treaty" needs to be ratified without delay to bring it into force. And secondly, at the World Trade Organization in Geneva, while good progress has been made on banning harmful fisheries subsidies, much more work remains to be done to remove subsidies that allow the overcapacity of industrial fishing fleets and, thereby, the perpetuation of gross overfishing.

The detrimental impact of anthropogenic pollution on the ocean is in evidence around the world. Be it through plastics, microplastics, fertilizer and pesticide run-offs, sewage, chemicals, or oil spills, we must do much better in controlling marine pollution. I look forward to the wave of ocean action building further after UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi and at *The Economist*'s World Ocean Summit in Lisbon, where, on both occasions, marine pollution will be prominently featured.

Meanwhile, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14.4 remains worryingly unfulfilled. This target tackles illegal fishing, harmful fishing practices, and overfishing, and I've no doubt it will be a subject of intense interest at the third UN Ocean Conference in Nice, France, 9–13 June 2025. In preparation for that milestone event, in concert with the Government of the Solomon Islands, FAO, and the Forum Fisheries Agency, I'm helping organize the Honiara Summit to be held 22–24 July this year, with a view to examining how the world can improve on its delivery of SDG 14.4.

Happily, ocean science is receiving more attention now than at any other time in human history. At a time of global climate crisis, this is as it should be, for we have major decisions looming ahead of us in relation to planetary conditions. The State of the Ocean Report issued by IOC-UNESCO in 2022 said that the quantitative description of the ocean is drastically incomplete, and as a result, current knowledge is insufficient to effectively inform solutions to the ocean that humanity is facing. It is thus that we must attach great importance to the outcomes of the UN Ocean Decade Conference being held in Barcelona in April this year.

Before closing, please allow me to thank IISD for its work over the decades. Those reading the Earth Negotiations Bulletin for the first time should know that many legions of seasoned diplomats and conference-goers have benefitted from the balanced reporting of IISD over the years and have accorded it high respect throughout.

Ambassador Peter Thomson

UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean

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END FOSSIL FUEL
SAVE OUR PLANET
AND
OUR FUTURE

← An environmental activist interrupts a high-level event at UNFCCC COP 28. UN security escorted her out. (IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis)

Letter from the Editor

In 2023, the world returned to older, Cold War-like patterns with decidedly modern twists. There was considerable speculation the world was slipping into a new Cold War rife with conflict. Wars openly raged in Ukraine, the Gaza Strip, the Sudan, Syria, and many others. With so many conflicts, humanitarian workers in Sudan asked if allies were forgetting about the largest human displacement crisis in the world. NATO was seen dusting off military plans that reflected Cold War strategies. The International Monetary Fund asked how to preserve economic cooperation amid geopolitical tensions and a rocky economic recovery. We have similar questions about environmental cooperation (see Section 3).

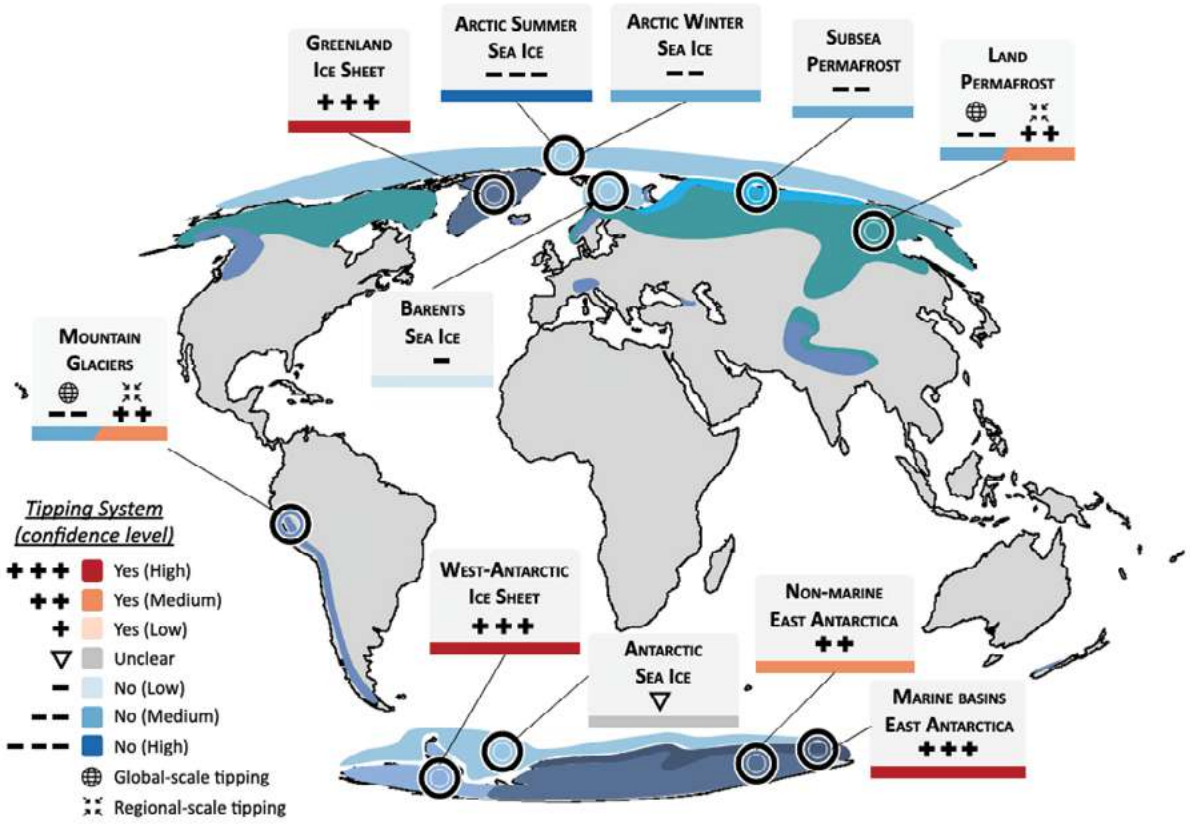
Artificial intelligence caused existential worries. An open letter signed by leaders in the sector called for a 6-month moratorium. Other researchers said the only solution was to shut AI down. Despite these worries, several reports looked to AI to help solve global crises. Researchers considered AI's potential to protect biodiversity and save endangered species. AI allowed scientists to speak to whales. Google speculated that AI could reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The climate, biodiversity, and pollution crises continue to loom over these geopolitical and technological worries. Environmental crises can exacerbate conflict and vice versa. Technology relies on a stable environment. Everything we've put in "the Cloud" exists in a series of undersea cables and data processing centres prone to natural disasters.

2023 was a year of anxiety. The multiple joined-up crises left many of us feeling small in the wake of enormous, seemingly intractable problems. Perhaps that's why TikTok overtook the BBC as people's main news source: we may be only able to handle 3 minutes of bad news at a time. Modern anxieties about the growing "polycrisis" may be particularly acute among young people. Oxford's Children's Word of the Year for 2023 was climate change, with many kids citing the news as the source of their worries. While youth are increasingly considered a moral voice across many environmental issues, I hope they don't fall prey to the paralysis and apathy that can come from the constant drip of doom and gloom. A new group of young people started their terms in the UN Youth Advisory Group in 2023. As in previous years, we hope the energy and moral case young people bring can provoke change in those currently in power.

In the summer, I constantly refreshed British Columbia's government wildfire app as the Donnie Creek wildfire raged less than 100 km from my brothers' homes, leaving lasting problems for the charred land. It was the first

Figure 1. Cryosphere tipping points



Source: The Global Tipping Points Report 2023.

Note: The ++ and – – markers indicate the Global Tipping Point Report authors' confidence that the system has a tipping point.

of the "mega-fires" in the Canadian 2023 fire season and one of many in a year of intense global wildfire activity. Forest fires partly caused Southeast Asia's regional haze and sparked regional tensions. In a fierce 2023 twist, climate change fuelled these fires, and these fires fuelled climate change.

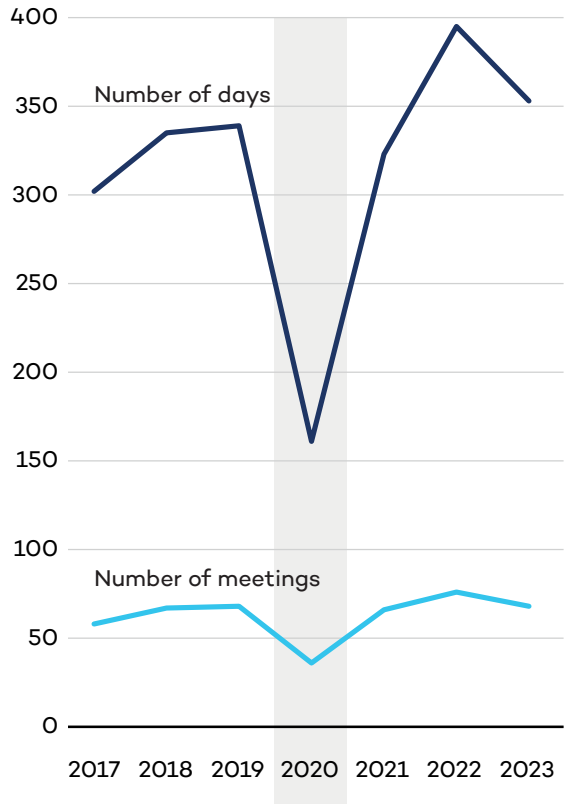
Across the board, 2023 was a sobering year for those worried about the environment. Even scientists were surprised by the rate of degradation. Biodiversity loss was "significantly more alarming" than first thought. Five major climate tipping points, well, tipped (see Figure 1). Sadly, some glacial ice finds its way to cocktails in Dubai. In response, natural scientists—those who think about atmospheric concentrations and climate-ocean interactions—urged national

and global politics to move faster and further.

We learned a lot in 2023 about how well global political responses are faring. Several treaty bodies undertook performance reviews, which we cover in Section 2. While the SDG Summit revealed the sorry state of the Goals, not all news was grim. Some of the world's most dangerous chemicals, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), are declining in the environment and our bodies. There were other wins in 2023, including on chemicals and marine life in international waters. We review the highs and lows of a busy year in Section 1.

Behind big headlines, there is significant progress. The International Energy Agency predicted renewables and nuclear energy will displace fossil fuels and cover the growth in energy demand. This prediction is based on national-level wins. The ever-optimistic Progress Playbook reports how Chile's energy mix was 63% renewable in 2023. Portugal achieved 75% for the first half of 2023; Spain kept up the 75% benchmark for 11 months. China added more renewable energy in 2023 than the world did in 2022. Solar and wind overtook coal for the first time in the United States, a quick real-world success for the Inflation Reduction Act. Despite the need for rapid action, there are also reminders of the need to proceed with care: scientists are concerned that some offshore wind installations could harm marine life in the U.S. Nantucket Shoals.

Figure 2. ENB meetings



Source: Author's calculations.

Will this national-level progress lead to global ambition? 2024 has major milestones ahead. We preview these to round out this report in Section 4. We know it's a fool's errand to predict global environmental governance, but we like to give it a try. Unlike other global issues, the outcomes of environmental cooperation are never certain before the last gavel falls to close a meeting. And we still have so much to learn. The Natural History Museum described a record 815 new species in 2023. The photos inspire awe in our world. My favourite is the new leaf-tailed gecko. I hope 2024 will have even more awe—and action—for our planet.


DON'T FAIL US
PHASE OUT
FOSSIL FUELS!

← Top: Demonstrators urge delegates in Dubai to accelerate the energy transition. (IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis)

Bottom: Moriana Philip, Marshall Islands, cries at the closing plenary of UNFCCC COP 28. (IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis)

The Year at a Glance

2023 saw the last of the COVID pandemic-delayed milestones completed. Countries adopted major decisions to improve global chemicals management and protect marine life in international waters. But most of the year was about making all these rules work. Across nearly all issue areas, the focus was funding implementation and reviewing performance.

There was a lot of *stocktaking*. The world assessed progress toward the SDGs at the mid-point in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The first global stocktake (GST) of climate action concluded in Dubai. The state of our agrifood and water systems also got attention.

Reaching Milestones

The last two milestones due in 2020 finally crossed the finish line in 2023. The delay was not entirely due to the pandemic. There were also procedural delays and political divides to overcome.

In September, the International Conference on Chemicals Management adopted the Global Framework on Chemicals. It succeeds the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, which has helped guide chemical use since 2006. Like its predecessor, the new framework takes a multistakeholder approach. Governments will work alongside intergovernmental organizations, the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders to support chemical action. They will have to work hard. The framework includes 28 goals, including preventing or minimizing the adverse effects of chemicals throughout their life cycle (see Table 1).

The Minamata Convention agreed to phase out mercury in cosmetics by 2025. It's part of a broader trend in chemicals to address the products that we use in everyday life, from cookware to cosmetics. The negotiations for a plastics treaty featured repeated calls to reduce, or phase out, harmful chemical additives in plastics. Small island states put forward this point most strongly, given the volume of plastics washing up on their shores.

Countries also completed the international legally binding instrument on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ). Understandably, the UN is referring to this as the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Agreement. We've tracked the BBNJ process from the beginning of February 2006. After so long, little wonder that it was dubbed "a triumph of multilateralism."

Table 1. High-level Summary of the Global Framework on Chemicals

Target	Deadline	Responsibility
Strategic Objective A: Legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and capacities support and achieve the safe and sustainable management of chemicals throughout their life cycle.		
A1: Adopt, implement, and enforce legal frameworks. Establish appropriate institutional capacity to prevent or minimize adverse effects as appropriate for their national circumstances.	2030	Governments
A2: Develop guidelines to support interested governments and stakeholders to implement effective strategies, building on existing initiatives.	2030	Intergovernmental stakeholders
A3: Implement measures to prevent or minimize adverse effects from chemicals throughout their life cycle.	2030	Companies
A4: Prevent illegal trade and traffic	2030	Stakeholders
A5: Work towards notifying, regulating, or prohibiting the export of chemicals they have prohibited nationally, in line with international obligations.	2030	Governments
A6: Have access to poison centers equipped to prevent and respond to poisonings, and access to training in chemical risk prevention and clinical toxicology.	2030	All countries
A7: Effective measures in place to phase out highly hazardous pesticides in agriculture where the risks have not been managed and where safer and affordable alternatives are available, and to promote transition to those alternatives	2035	Stakeholders

Target	Deadline	Responsibility
Strategic Objective B: Comprehensive and sufficient knowledge, data and information are generated, available and accessible to enable informed decisions and actions.		
B1: Comprehensive data and information on the properties of chemicals are generated and made available and accessible.	2035	—
B2: Reliable information on chemicals in materials and products throughout the value chain made available.	2030	Stakeholders
B3: Generate data on chemicals production and use, and data on emissions and releases, making these data available and publicly accessible.	2035	Stakeholders
B4: Apply appropriate guidelines, best available practices and standardized tools for hazard and risk assessment.	2035	Stakeholders
B5: Develop and implement educational, training, and public awareness programmes on chemical safety, sustainability, safer alternatives and the benefits of reducing risks, taking into consideration a gender-responsive approach.	2030	—
B6: Implemented the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS) in all relevant sectors as appropriate for national circumstances.	2030	Governments
B7: Generate and make available comprehensive and accessible monitoring and surveillance data and information on concentrations and potential exposure sources of chemicals in humans, other biota and environmental media.	2030	Stakeholders
Strategic Objective C: Issues of concern are identified, prioritized and addressed.		
C1: Processes and programmes of work including timelines are established, adopted and implemented for identified issues of concern.	—	—

Target	Deadline	Responsibility
Strategic Objective D: Safer alternatives and innovative, sustainable solutions in product value chains are in place to maximize the health and environmental benefits and prevent or minimize the risks.		
D1: Consistently invest in and achieve innovations towards advancing sustainable chemistry and resource efficiency throughout the life cycle of chemicals.	2030	Companies
D2: Implement policies that encourage safer alternatives and sustainable approaches throughout the lifecycle, including best available techniques, green procurement and circular economy approaches.	2035	Governments
D3: Incorporate strategies and policies to implement sound management in finance approaches and business models and apply internationally recognized or equivalent reporting standards.	2030	Private sector
D4: Prioritize sustainable solutions and safer alternatives in products and mixtures, including in consumer products, in research and innovation programmes.	2030	Relevant stakeholders
D5: Implement policies and programmes to increase support for safer and more sustainable agricultural practices, including agroecology, integrated pest management and the use of non-chemical alternatives.	2030	Governments
D6: Develop and implement sustainable management strategies for major economic and industry sectors that identify priority chemicals of concern and standards and measures to reduce their impact and, where feasible, their input along the value chain.	2030	—
D7: Implement measures and strive to ensure effective occupational health and safety practices and environmental protection measures in all relevant sectors and throughout the supply chain.	2030	Stakeholders

Target	Deadline	Responsibility
Strategic Objective E: Enhanced implementation occurs through increased and effective resource mobilization, partnerships, cooperation, capacity-building, and integration into all relevant decision-making processes		
E1: Mainstream sound management through implementation in all relevant sectoral plans, budgets and development plans, and development assistance policies and programmes.	2035	Governments
E2: Strengthen partnerships and networks among sectors and stakeholders.	2030	—
E3: Identify and mobilize adequate, predictable and sustainable financial resources from all sources by and for all stakeholders, including by leveraging private finance and promoting innovative and blended-finance schemes.	—	—
E4: Identify funding gaps for implementation, including through the Global Framework on Chemicals Fund.	—	—
E5: Measures are in place policies to internalize costs through different approaches.	2030	Governments
E6: Identify and strengthen synergies and linkages with other key environmental, health, and labour policies, such as those related to climate change solutions, biodiversity conservation, human rights protection, universal health coverage or primary health care.	2030	Stakeholders

Source: ENB Summary of ICCM 5.

It's a dense treaty with several interlocking parts. It sets out provisions for conservation, such as area-based management tools like marine protected areas. The new COP will be able to establish such areas. Thirteen provisions relate to environmental impact assessments. New committees will consider access and benefit-sharing of marine genetic resources and capacity building. Once 60 ratifications are secured, the pieces will be in place to manage 90% of the ocean's biomass, the world's most diverse ecosystem.

Both the chemicals and biodiversity outcomes referred to other recent wins for multilateralism—the Kunming-Montreal 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework featured in both discussions. The links for the high seas treaty to protect marine biodiversity are rather obvious. Poor chemical management can damage soil health, poison animals, and cause ecosystem collapse. And we've seen the images of turtles and other marine animals surrounded by ocean plastic.

Funding Implementation

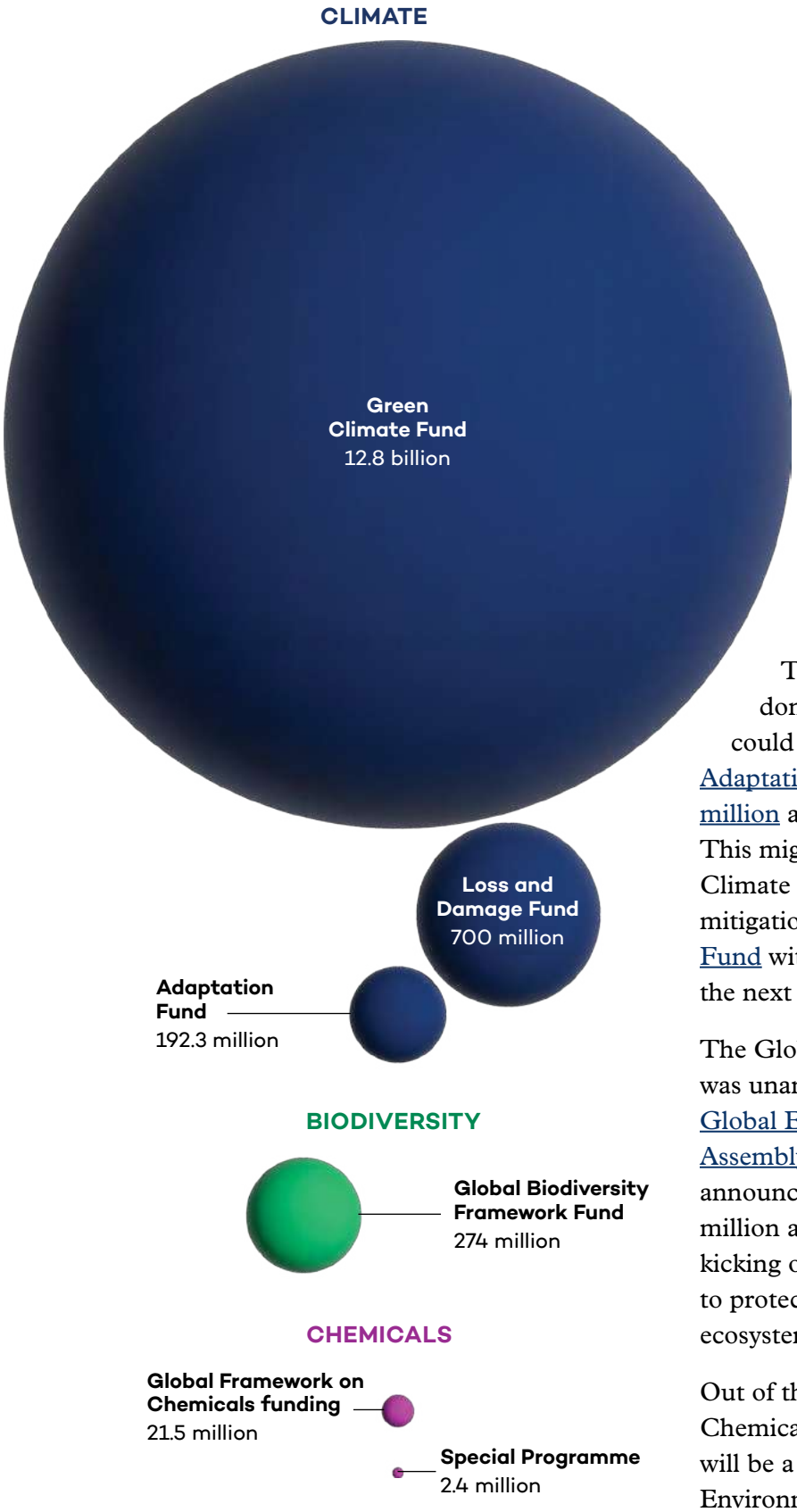
In 2023, finance was more critical than ever. Finance is central to nearly all environmental negotiations, but the geopolitics and economic woes of 2023 raised the stakes still higher. The economies of many countries in the Global South are reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, and skyrocketing inflation. What little fiscal space there once was to fund environmental action at home dwindled to zero.

And the current financial infrastructure does little to help. Calls for economic reform were loud in 2023. The 2023 State of Finance for Nature report documents that every year, nearly USD 7 trillion is invested in activities that directly and negatively impact nature. Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados and one of Time Magazine's Climate 100, led the charge. In Paris, she spearheaded a Summit for a New Global Financing Pact. The goal was to update the financial system set up by colonial powers after World War II to meet today's challenges, especially climate vulnerability and biodiversity loss. Several ideas found their way into the Political Declaration from the SDG Summit, including debt swaps.

Reforming development assistance was a theme in climate change, biodiversity, chemicals, and sustainable development discussions. As was innovative financing. Given the enormous and growing need for financial and other support to realize positive outcomes on the ground, donors are keen to find additional sources. Some feel that the private sector should have more responsibility, particularly given the varied donor support across global environmental crises (see Figure 3).

Funding for climate-related loss and damage was a high point of the Dubai Climate Change Conference. The loss and damage fund (its name to be determined)

Figure 3. Donors' pledges in 2023 (USD)



Source: ENB reports.

was operationalized. Countries capitalized the fund, or related funding arrangements, with nearly USD 700 million pledged in the first 2 days of the Conference. While this seems like a lot, let's not lose perspective: in December, Japanese superstar baseballer Shohei Ohtani signed a contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers for the same amount.

There were disappointments at donors' support for adaptation that could help avoid loss and damage. The Adaptation Fund raised USD 192.31 million at its annual Contributor Dialogue. This might put more pressure on the Green Climate Fund to support adaptation and mitigation. 30 countries replenished the Fund with a record USD 12.8 billion over the next four years.

The Global Biodiversity Framework Fund was unanimously ratified at the Seventh Global Environment Facility (GEF) Assembly. Canada and the United Kingdom announced contributions of CAD 200 million and GBP 10 million, respectively, kicking off the capitalization of a new fund to protect endangered species and their ecosystems.

Out of the gate, the Global Framework on Chemicals set up funding arrangements. It will be a time-limited fund hosted by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). Donors may include multilateral, bilateral, and

private sector sources. Germany, the host of the meeting, pledged EUR 20 million to the fund. These pledges supplemented earlier announcements at the Berlin Chemicals Forum for the Special Programme on Institutional Strengthening for the Chemicals Cluster. Germany pledged a further EUR 1 million, Denmark USD 1 million, and the United Kingdom EUR 300,000.

The Global Biodiversity Framework also agreed to establish a multilateral mechanism for benefit-sharing using digital sequence information (DSI). DSI is a placeholder term to refer to data on genetic sequences that are stored in databases. Using this information in medicine, cosmetics, and much more has a wide range of monetary and non-monetary benefits. Efforts started in 2023 to determine benefits-sharing arrangements, including a global fund. This group may need to consider the BBNJ treaty and the work of its new committee on access to and benefit-sharing of genetic resources.

Missed Opportunities

2023 wasn't all multilateral triumphs. There were decisions and declarations not adopted. Some outcomes were weaker than many hoped. Throughout the year, there was a sense that outcomes represented what was politically possible. Making all "equally unhappy" yielded agreements, not necessarily ambition.

The SDG Summit's Political Declaration reaffirms a shared commitment to the 2030 Agenda as the blueprint for sustainable development. But it also represents what the Co-Facilitators of the negotiations have called the "broadest possible agreement." In other words, the lowest common denominator. The absence of actionable commitments, including addressing the built-in weaknesses of the 2030 Agenda and its follow-up and review, and limited references to future generations have been cited among the obvious shortcomings.

By the time the Dubai Climate Change Conference closed, many concerns and disappointments had been expressed by speakers on the list. Even as some hailed the outcome as "the beginning of the end" of fossil fuels, others couldn't help feeling disappointed. A delegate from a small island state sat in tears.

Many focused on the absence of a few words communicating a big idea: fossil fuel phasedown. It wasn't only the media using this phrase as a marker of climate ambition. Over 170 states joined together to call for a phasedown. Civil society pushed for a "fast, fair, funded" phasedown. They left Dubai disappointed. The GST decision calls for "accelerating efforts toward the phasedown" of unabated coal only.

Countries crafted a politically acceptable package around an energy transition. It includes a list of options for countries to choose from. The menu has a global goal to triple renewable energy capacity by 2030 but also weaker language on coal and methane.

Carbon dioxide removal technologies feature prominently to appease oil-producing states. So-called "transitional fuels" are singled out. Several pointed out that any new infrastructure for natural gas would have a decades-long lifespan, effectively locking fossil fuels into the future.

Many from the Global South lamented the adaptation outcome. The 2-year work program on the Global Goal on Adaptation ended in Dubai. However, parties did not deliver a robust framework with targets and indicators. They identified broad thematic and governance goals to improve resilience in agriculture, health, and other areas by 2030. They also embraced the many ways countries communicate their adaptation plans and needs. But it lacks measurement. As many pointed out, you can't manage what you can't measure. Another 2-year work program will take up this work.

It's not often that countries try to restructure a treaty. After several years of frustration that some parties repeatedly blocked action on chemicals (despite agreeing that they meet the listing criteria), a coalition of countries proposed to amend the Rotterdam Convention. The proposal would create a new annex of the Convention. It would be a home for chemicals that not all countries could agree to subject to the prior informed consent (PIC) procedure. Voting would be permitted for this new annex, and the PIC procedure would only apply among countries that are party to it.

Heated debates ensued. Both sides claimed to be working toward a more effective Convention. Since 2006, countries have added 15 chemicals to the PIC procedure. There is a growing list of chemicals left in limbo: countries agree that the criteria for listing are met but do not agree to add them to the treaty. Proponents argued that this reduces the information available to manage these hazardous chemicals, particularly pesticides. Opponents said the Convention is effective, suggesting that listing repercussions go beyond simply providing information.

As most predicted, the proposal went to a vote. Multiple rounds of procedural delays and votes dragged the process on for hours. The proposal ultimately failed by a slim margin. This could be a missed opportunity to ensure the Convention can live up to its goal of providing information to countries on managing imported chemicals. The discussion will continue in 2025. Countries put a process in place to gather information about the implications of listing chemicals, both positive and negative.

← Delegates work into the early morning hours to agree on a provision on disputed areas in the new high seas treaty. (IISD/ENB | Mike Muzurakis)

Taking Stock in 2023

Is global environmental governance effective? Well, that's a lively academic and policy debate. Is a treaty effective because countries implement its provisions? It can resolve the problems it was designed to address, or it can adapt, setting new directions for the future. In their unique "TripleCOP" format, the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions addressed different types of effectiveness over the same two-week period. Our analysis of the BBNJ negotiations highlighted that, sometimes, getting to an agreement is itself a success. In 2023, we learned more about these varied forms of effectiveness.

Similar themes emerged across stocktaking exercises on many issues. These reports outline several faults in global environmental governance. Time and again, it's those least responsible for the problems that face the harshest consequences of climate change, biodiversity loss, and chemical pollution. The reports show the continued degradation of our natural world. The disproportionate impacts will continue to be felt by women, children, Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk and farmers, and others often left behind.

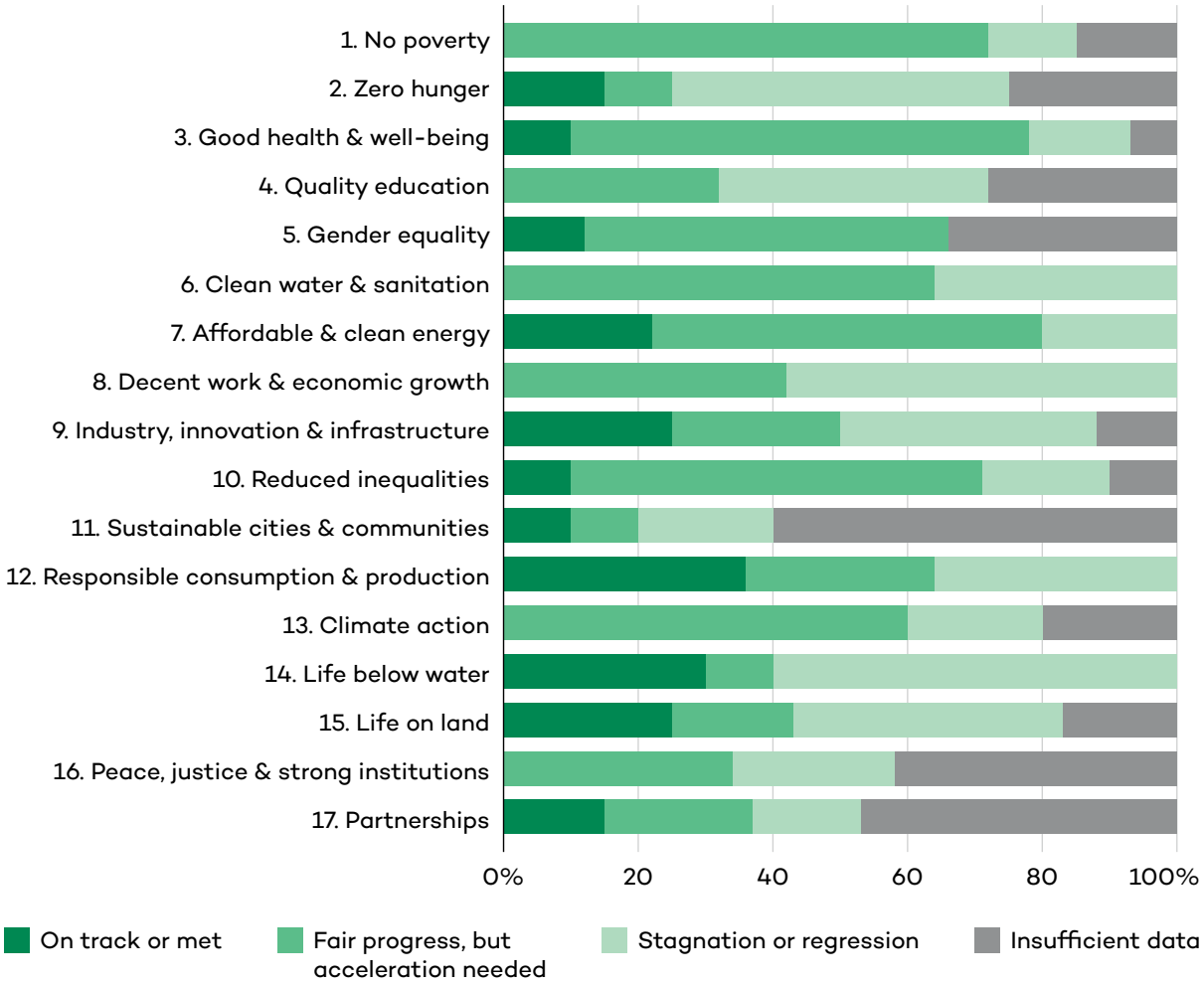
Given these faults, the reports stress the need for transformational change. Our food systems, financial systems, energy mix, development assistance, and trade patterns, to name a few, continue to undermine the goals set out in several treaties and declarations. For each issue below, we learned more about the extent of the problems and future directions to resolve them.

Chemical Pollution

Let's start with the good news. The Stockholm Convention evaluated its effectiveness and found the treaty was working. The Convention eliminates or restricts the production and use of POPs—a particularly nasty set of chemicals. They can last years in the environment, bioaccumulate in humans and animals, are toxic, and travel globally through air and water. Widely used in plastics, cookware, textiles, and pesticides, POPs are linked to cancers and reproductive problems, including low sperm counts in men and lower fertility in women. The evaluation found POPs levels in the environment, animals, and people are decreasing. Even levels of two groups of the "forever chemicals" listed in the Convention have declined.

Still, there are over 17,000 contaminated sites in Europe alone, and stockpiles are leaking POPs worldwide. There is a long way to go. POPs will contaminate the environment and health for a long time. The evaluation calls for raising awareness and sharing information with at-risk populations to help manage exposure. There is also much we don't know about POPs. Further work on

Figure 4. The percentage of SDG targets achieved



Source: Data from the 2023 SDG Goals Report Special Edition.

global monitoring and measuring programs will help fill the gaps.

Sustainable Development

The SDGs consist of 17 goals and 169 targets, creating a considerable task to keep track of global progress. The results did not inspire applause. According to the 2023 UN Secretary-General's report, the world is on track to meet just 15% of the SDG targets, while 37% show signs of stagnation or reversal (see Figure 4). At the UN High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, countries tried to determine how to respond to such dire news, particularly now that we're at the midway point of the 2030 Agenda.

Business as usual won't correct course. The 2023 *Global Sustainable Development Report* (GSDR), launched at the SDG Summit, urges deliberate transformations. It argues that transformations are inevitable, yet without planning and support, they can be unjust and leave some people further behind. The GSDR calls for countries to develop national plans for transformative, accelerated action. The report doubles down on the entry points for transformative action identified in the GSDR 2019 Report:

- human well-being and capabilities

- sustainable and just economies
- food systems and healthy nutrition
- energy decarbonization with universal access
- urban and peri-urban development
- global environmental commons.

Negotiations on how to respond to this news were reportedly hard-fought throughout 2023. The result was the Political Declaration adopted at the Summit. It reaffirms the shared understanding that the 2030 Agenda remains the blueprint for sustainable development. Context was a vital component of the Declaration. It observes "drastic changes" since the first SDG Summit in 2019—primarily the COVID-19 pandemic, abrupt climate changes, and armed conflicts—although it notes that the SDGs were already off track by 2019.

Leaders left the SDG Summit with homework. They made 20 commitments, although several are framed as "needs" or goals that countries "recommit" to. Many correspond to specific SDGs, such as poverty, gender equality, health, water, energy, climate, and consumption and production. Other commitments included addressing the digital divide, plastic pollution, and policy integration.

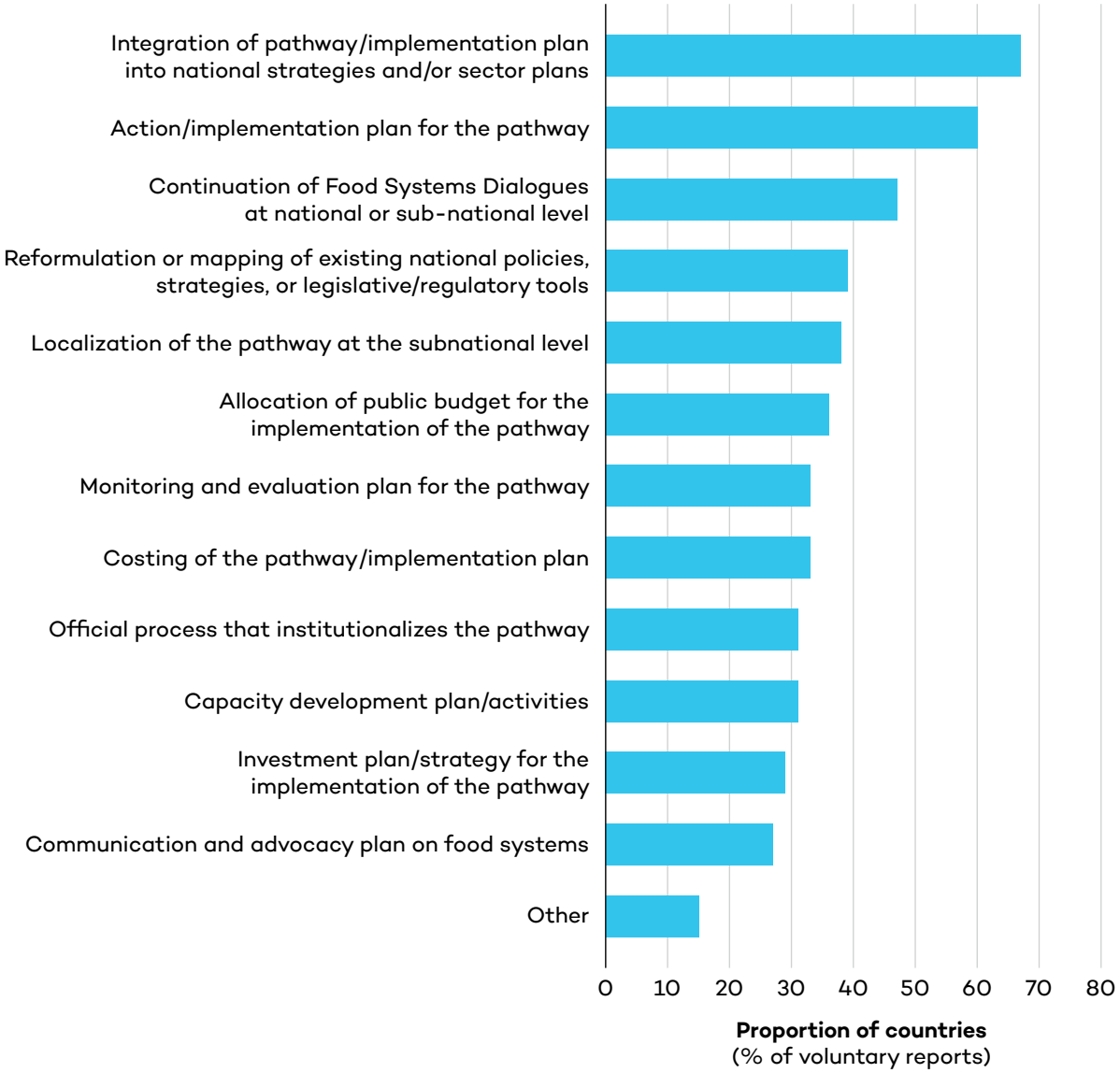
Agriculture

Our agrifood systems also need urgent transformative change to achieve their full potential. So said the UN Food Systems Summit+2 Stocktaking Moment (UNFSS+2). It reviewed progress in implementing the 2021 Food Systems Summit. The ultimate goal is to support global action toward zero hunger, food security, and nutrition as drivers to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Just 2 years on, some progress was evident (see Figure 5). But technical capacity, infrastructure, and other barriers remain.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) provided technical details that could support transformational change. In its flagship *State of Food and Agriculture 2023* report, FAO proposed a new method for "true cost accounting" of food production to consider agrifood systems' hidden environmental, social, and health costs and benefits.

Together, these efforts helped pave the way for the UAE Declaration on Sustainable Agriculture, Resilient Food Systems and Climate Action, adopted at the Dubai Climate Change Conference. The declaration commits its 134 signatories to adapting and transforming agriculture and food systems in the face of climate change, including strengthening integrated water management. While the political signal it sends is strong, experience shows that the extent to which such statements are followed up with action varies greatly. There were calls to put food on the negotiation table, including mainstreaming agriculture in countries' next nationally determined contributions.

Figure 5. Outputs toward the implementation of countries' Food Systems Transformation Pathway



Source: Data from Making Food Systems Work for People and Planet UN Food Systems Summit +2.

Climate Change

We use "stocktake" mainly because of the Paris Agreement. "Effectiveness evaluation" or simply "report" haven't caught on the way stocktake has. The first GST under the Paris Agreement concluded at the Dubai Climate Change Conference.

The GST had two stages. The 18-month technical dialogue wrapped up in June. It was a wide-ranging review, including an assessment of all areas of climate action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The inputs were similarly broad. Over 170,000 pages were submitted by parties and observers, in addition to the world café sessions to solicit further input. It left the dialogue's co-chairs with an enormous task to produce the technical dialogue's synthesis report.

The dialogue's synthesis finds that "governments need to support systems transformations that mainstream climate resilience and low [greenhouse gas] GHG emissions development." It notes that whole-

The SDGs are displayed as literal "building blocks" for a better world at the 2023 HLPF. (IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth)

of-society approaches should be informed by local context. As a result, equity and inclusion "should enable greater ambition."

Many of these themes were shared by a much longer-standing stocktaking exercise. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the Synthesis Report of the sixth assessment cycle and its shorter Summary for Policymakers in March 2023. Approving the Summary for Policymakers was a marathon. The panel needed an additional 49 hours to decide which messages to highlight, and how.

The headline statements of the Synthesis Report make for a short, sobering assessment of the climate's current status, future trajectory, and options available to governments. One headline statement perhaps sums them all up: "There is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all." Emissions are rising, we're hitting adaptation limits, and action this decade is critical. Globally unequal patterns of unsustainable emissions, land use, and consumption remain at the heart of the climate crisis.

The task in Dubai was to provide a political response to the grim messages from the IPCC and the slightly more optimistic ones from the technical dialogue. The GST decision included backward- and forward-looking elements. Collectively crafting the backward-looking elements revealed different interpretations of the past. But most attention focused on the forward-looking direction the GST would set.

The GST outcome was a Rorschach test—the inkblots everyone perceives differently. UNFCCC Executive Secretary Simon Stiell and several countries declared 2023 the "beginning of the end" of the fossil fuel era. For the first time in a UNFCCC decision, the outcome from Dubai calls on parties to contribute to "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner."

Small island states, however, were beyond disappointed. Their focal points said they were not in the room when the decision was taken. For them, the GST outcome signals their demise. The outcome falls short of calling for a fossil fuel phase-out. It references "loopholes" such as transitional fuels and carbon dioxide removals.

The GST decision calls for countries to align their next nationally determined contributions, due in 2025, to stay below 1.5° C. However, it also reminds us that the Paris Agreement is founded on countries determining their own climate targets and policies. The next COP Presidencies have signed up to help countries walk this tightrope. Under "Mission 1.5," the Emerati, Azerbaijani, and Brazilian Presidencies will try to enhance global cooperation to achieve a climate-safe world.

Biodiversity

While most of the stocktaking in 2023 focused on climate and chemicals, we also learned more about the state of biodiversity, and similar themes emerged. The challenges are widespread. Also, the full effects are not always clear, but there is evidence of disproportionate impacts.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) published the Invasive Alien Species Assessment in 2023. It highlights the adverse effects of invasive alien species on the economy, food security, water security, and human health. In 2019, the global annual costs of biological invasions exceeded an estimated USD 423 billion.

As the other assessments found, the poorest among us—especially women—are disproportionately affected. Invasive alien species are at least partly responsible for 60% of plant and animal extinctions. The report demonstrated that the threats are increasing markedly in all regions, but those who directly depend on nature for their livelihoods experience the adverse effects of invasive alien species more acutely.

The IPBES report calls for enhanced coordination and collaboration and national strategies to manage biological invasions. Like all science-policy assessments, the IPBES report identifies key policy options for prevention, early detection, effective control, and mitigation of the negative impacts of invasive alien species. As the ENB analysis notes, IPBES is uniquely poised to support the implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework. However, the drivers of invasive alien species, such as climate change, are amplifying. In recognition of such interconnections, IPBES also requested that the Secretariat continue efforts to collaborate with the IPCC.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← An attendee at the 2023 Middle East and North Africa Climate Week reads the latest news. (IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth)

Geopolitics

In 2023, over 110 armed conflicts raged, with dire humanitarian and ecological consequences. Many further tensions simmered without spilling over into violence. Growing strains on resources arising from climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution make practical global cooperation more imperative than ever. But the era of environmental cooperation that blossomed at the end of the Cold War may be closing.

Paramount are the humanitarian crises that accompany conflict. Basic human needs—shelter, water, food, dignity—often go unmet. These short-term needs may be exacerbated by the ecological damage conflict causes. Healthy lands, clean water sources, and thriving biodiversity are prerequisites to rebuilding safe, healthy communities and livelihoods.

Conflict is also an environmental problem. Violent conflict raises emissions and destroys ecosystems. These impacts are rarely tracked. One estimate puts the carbon footprint of the world's militaries at 5.5% of global GHG emissions. While attention to the impact of warfare on the environment is growing, as yet there are no standard methodologies for tracking or reporting the resulting emissions.

UNEP released an interim report on the environmental impacts of a Ukrainian dam breached while under the control of the Russian military. This analysis assessed the upstream and downstream damage, including chemical contamination and ecological harm to protected areas. It concluded that the "consequences will be felt for decades, reaching beyond Ukraine's borders." UNEP also made clear the damage will be costly to address.

Broader geopolitical tensions weighed heavily on multilateral environmental negotiations during 2023. Tensions arising from strained relationships and armed conflicts spilled into environmental governance forums. This slowed deliberations, with procedural and substantive implications. Votes became common. The impacts of armed conflict on environmental cooperation were thrown into sharp relief.

Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine has resonated across many aspects of global environmental governance. The international community has widely condemned this invasion. Words are now actions. Formal statements delivered during major international meetings in 2022 criticizing Russia have given way to refusals to cooperate with Russia in other contexts.

Procedurally, votes were more common in 2023 than we've ever seen before. Usually, negotiators spend considerable time and effort to ensure consensus. Voting is looked

down upon for treaties where a vote is even possible. In 2023, there were many votes on substantive issues and procedural ones. The final day of the "Triple COP" for the Basel, Rotterdam, and Stockholm Conventions was largely spent in a series of votes by secret ballot.

The election of officers is now a lengthy, fraught process. Many states refused to elect delegates from Russia to authoritative positions within bodies such as the IPCC. Negotiations for a new "IPCC-like" science-policy body on chemicals, waste, and pollution experienced similar delays. Its first face-to-face meeting started with a lengthy voting procedure to elect the Chair over Russia's objection. In December, the meeting was relocated to Nairobi from Jordan due to conflict in the Gaza Strip. Then, Russia delayed the proceedings by requesting multiple rounds of verification of government delegates' credentials. The Open-Ended Working Group has to finish its work by the end of 2024. The procedural delays cost nearly two of the Group's 15 scheduled meeting days.

After lengthy deliberations, Azerbaijan was identified as the 2024 climate COP President. Russia would not agree to an EU member state as host. Armenia and Azerbaijan are in conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Climate COPs are now huge, leaving many other countries unable to host due to a lack of facilities that can hold tens of thousands of delegates. Ultimately, Armenia removed its objection, paving the way for Azerbaijan to host. Armenia's agreement came simultaneously with prisoner releases and other efforts to ease tensions.

There are longer-term, substantive implications of geopolitical tensions. Science is suffering. Severing scientific ties undermines work to collect crucial data to support policy-making. This is felt most acutely in the Arctic—a region particularly vulnerable to chemical pollution and climate change. Russia comprises nearly half of the Arctic region and, until now, has been a critical collaborator in international partnerships, such as the Arctic Council.

The Council has refused to continue working with Russia, freezing about one-third of its existing projects. In the absence of consensus among all eight members of the Council (Russia, Canada, the United States, Finland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark), projects cannot be renewed or approved. Some of the Council's assessment reports conducted under the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme are facing delays and gaps in any chapters related to Russia.

Cross-border data collection and sharing are impossible. Western scientists no longer share data or other scientific work with Russian counterparts. They also cannot enter Russia to gather data on melting permafrost and other pressing concerns about climate impacts, pollution, and biodiversity loss. This creates a permanent hole in the scientific record.

Biodiversity scientists were actively working to stave off similar problems. At the Global Crop Diversity Summit, held in November, participants discussed creating new seed banks to replicate those at risk due to violent conflict. Seed banks in Syria and Ukraine are now lost. With so much realized and potential conflict around the world, additional seed banks may be necessary to safeguard the future of plant biodiversity.

While science suffers, so too does the environment during these difficult times. The growing efforts in 2023 to track the environmental damage of conflict are in their early stages. But early work shows that suffering may well continue after conflict ends. The environmental damage could have long-term effects on citizens' ability to rebuild their livelihoods. At the same time, tensions threaten to undermine the global cooperation necessary to address humanitarian and environmental losses.


sing for hope
sing for hope
sing for hope

← A youth choir performs for diplomats, business leaders, and civil society advocates at the 2023 HLPF. (IISD/ENB | Kiara Worth)

Looking to 2024

If 2023 was a year of learning more about our world and efforts to save it while dealing with rapid technological, ecological, and geopolitical change, what could 2024 have in store? Could 2024 be a year when governments walk the paths they set for themselves in 2023?

Yes and no. No one meeting can save the world, and neither can a single year. Consistently ramping up action over time means we need upward trends, not fits and starts. For example, in 2024, the World Health Organization is expected to roll out a second malaria vaccine. This will save lives beyond malaria-afflicted regions. It could mean that toxic, globally travelling chemicals like DDT will no longer be necessary for malaria control.

The renewables trend may be unstoppable. Renewable energy could overtake coal in 2024, becoming the world's largest source of electricity. That could make it easier to phase out fossil fuels. Oil demand forecasts remain unclear. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries predicts a surge in demand for oil of 2.2 million barrels a day. The International Energy Agency expects a rise of 1.1 million barrels a day. Both organizations agree that there will be more demand for oil, and both cite geopolitical tensions and increased travel. These different predictions may be disagreements for the IPCC to consider during its seventh assessment cycle, which starts in 2024.

We could see several new agreements in the coming year. Some will set new rules. Others will forge new areas of global cooperation or try to set new work in motion. We could see a new treaty to address plastic pollution, including in the marine environment, across the entire lifecycle. Negotiations to establish a new science-policy panel on chemicals, waste, and pollution should be completed.

It will be a busy year for COPs. In 2024, the three Rio Conventions, for biodiversity, desertification, and climate change, will meet almost back-to-back-to-back. Saudi Arabia will host the desertification COP, seeking to advance work on land tenure and net-zero land degradation. Colombia will host the first UN Biodiversity Conference since the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Countries must demonstrate how their National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans align with the Framework. Resource mobilization for the Framework will be a crucial discussion.

The climate COP will again find itself hosted by a country reliant on oil. The main task in Azerbaijan is to settle on a new collective quantified finance goal. The stakes are high. Finance makes or breaks trust among countries. It also is necessary to safeguard the climate and people. Support can help

developing countries reduce emissions, adapt to climate change, and minimize loss and damage. The UNFCCC's first estimate of developing countries' needs increased to USD 5.8–5.9 trillion until 2030.

The Summit of the Future will try to "forge a new international consensus." The first section of the current "zero draft" focuses on sustainable development and financing. It reflects many of the discussions we saw in 2023, from the need to scale up and track financial support to rapidly reducing GHG emissions. There are ideas for accountability, such as a deadline for eliminating fossil fuel subsidies. Such tangible ideas could help raise the bar for a successful summit.

The UN Environment Assembly will likewise try to set new work in motion. Parties could propose a number of resolutions. The Intergovernmental Forum on Mining and Minerals had ideas for UNEA-6 resolutions on ensuring the "electric revolution" is sustainable. Perhaps the UN Secretary-General's new Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals could dovetail with any potential UNEA work on these issues.

All of this global goodwill may change course after any number of elections. 2024 will be a big year for democracy. Over half the world's population will be involved in democratic elections. Elections can slow decision making and shift the directions democracies take on domestic and foreign policy issues. The United States and India are among the major economies—and emitters—that will select their leadership for the coming years. Meanwhile, India is on track for its highest-ever increase in renewable energy in 2024. In the United States, Donald Trump has promised to gut the climate-friendly Inflation Reduction Act if elected. Elections can move major economies in drastically different directions at a time when we need "all hands on deck" to ensure emissions fall and species are safeguarded. The elections could also change the intensity and frequency of the geopolitical tensions affecting global goodwill and governance.

Change may be a constant feature of our modern world. Perhaps the challenge for 2024 will be to manage change. Realizing just transitions, ensuring fair biodiversity conservation, and safeguarding chemical and waste management are intertwined problems in constant flux. 2023 showed us that global cooperation is fragile—2024 must show us that it can rebound quickly to meet multiple, urgent needs.