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UNEA-7: Environmental Multilateralism Endures

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Rising nationalism and unilateralism, increasing great-power competition, and profound geopolitical shifts have posed a deep threat to the future of multilateralism. These issues are compounded by structural challenges such as the US-China rivalry, declining trust in global institutions, climate change, economic instability, and rapid technological disruptions. Taken together, they strain the global cooperation needed to address global crises, leading to calls for urgent and effective reform.

Environmental multilateralism faces a particularly deep need to safeguard its legitimacy and effectiveness. While platforms such as the Seventh United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-7) continue to adopt resolutions, the overall capacity of the global environmental governance system is weakening under intense pressure from geopolitical fragmentation, financial constraints, and institutional challenges.

Environmental Multilateralism's Key Challenges

Some of the principal challenges facing environmental multilateralism are geopolitical fragmentation, increased tensions between major powers, and a rise in populism that have led to a "triple political crisis" of mistrust, misinformation, and nationalism. In addition, a diminishing consensus on global goals has prompted some states to withdraw from, or threaten to exit, major Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). A clear example of this is the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on climate change.

There are also growing demands for institutional reform as emerging powers (like Brazil and India) and marginalized regions (such as Africa) intensify their calls for structural overhauls to the United Nations (UN) to ensure that its processes adequately reflect 21st-century power dynamics.

Another major obstacle facing multilateral institutions is the severe funding crisis. A significant shift in national priorities--particularly toward increased defense spending--has led to drastic cuts in overseas development assistance. This has resulted in a "liquidity crisis" within the UN, undermining the implementation of critical data-monitoring systems and environmental programs.

In addition, the rapid rise of technologies like artificial intelligence and the urgent demand for critical minerals for the energy transition are stretching existing multilateral frameworks. These emerging issues are often pushed to the forefront of the global agenda, sidelining agreements embedded in existing treaties.



As a result of these challenges, major international negotiations are increasingly prone to deadlock. One notable example of this is the failure to reach an agreement for a legally binding treaty to eliminate plastic pollution.

UNEA-7--Defying the Odds

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), the world's top forum for setting the global environmental agenda and strengthening international cooperation to tackle the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, held its seventh session from December 8–12, 2025, in Nairobi, Kenya, under the theme “Advancing Sustainable Solutions for a Resilient Planet.” UNEA-7 was widely characterized by participating nations and the UN as “proof that environmental multilateralism delivers.” Despite widespread political mistrust of global governance systems, the Assembly, to some extent, reinforced the role of collective action in addressing the triple planetary crisis.

In fact, UNEA-7 saw the adoption of 11 resolutions and 3 decisions, alongside a Ministerial Declaration that reaffirmed a commitment to a circular economy. A key resolution (7/5) focused on enhancing cooperation between various Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), aiming to reduce institutional silos and streamline national implementation.

In addition, the Assembly addressed emerging issues such as the environmental sustainability of artificial intelligence and the management of critical minerals essential for the energy transition, albeit resolutions for these hot topics were relatively diluted and lacked any concrete mechanisms for future follow-up or implementation.

Still, other new measures were adopted, such as to ensure the meaningful participation of children and youth in environmental decision-making processes and the role of sports in promoting sustainable solutions.

It is worth mentioning that UNEA-7 dedicated a day, December 10, 2025, to Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), aiming to champion stronger cooperation on global environmental challenges like climate, biodiversity, and pollution. The initiative focused on integrated approaches, breaking down institutional silos, and boosting implementation of treaties through whole-of-government and whole-of-society actions to achieve sustainable solutions and achieve the SDGs.



While some ambitious resolutions--such as deep-sea ecosystems and environmental crimes—were ultimately dropped due to a lack of consensus, the session was widely regarded as evidence that the multilateral system remains capable of delivering actionable outcomes.

In short, despite deep geopolitical tensions and divisions, UNEA-7 proved that environmental multilateralism can still endure--even in the face of widespread skepticism toward global governance systems.

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