



# State of Global Environmental Governance 2021

International Institute for  
Sustainable Development  
Earth Negotiations Bulletin



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## State of Global Environmental Governance 2021

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Edited by Jen Allan, PhD

Contributing authors: Elsa Tsioumani, PhD, Natalie Jones, PhD, and Bernard Soubry, PhD

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### Head Office

111 Lombard Avenue,  
Suite 325  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
Canada R3B 0T4

**Tel:** +1 (204) 958-7700

**Website:** [iisd.org](http://iisd.org)

**Twitter:** [@IISD\\_news](https://twitter.com/IISD_news)

**Website:** [enb.iisd.org](http://enb.iisd.org)

**Twitter:** [@IISD\\_ENB](https://twitter.com/IISD_ENB)

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## Letter from the Editor

I look forward to the year when these reports won't start with a reference to the Coronavirus pandemic. This isn't that year. 2021 started with optimism—early distribution of vaccines in the Global North—and ended with the spread of a new, highly transmissible variant and persistent vaccine inequity. The pandemic continued to take lives and livelihoods. It still shapes how we live and the ability of states to collectively address environmental crises.

On its face, 2021 seemed a lot like the year before—disrupted and difficult. But that glib assessment doesn't give UN staff, negotiators, and civil society representatives their due. 2021 was a year of learning.

Online meeting practices evolved. We had “hybrid” meetings involving both online and in-person modes of work. Meetings spanned multiple weeks to allow for fewer hours spent online each day. They often rotated time zones, as delegates tried to juggle global governance and time zone equity with household labour, sleep, and their regular day jobs. Nearly everyone had a turn at a 4am contact group.

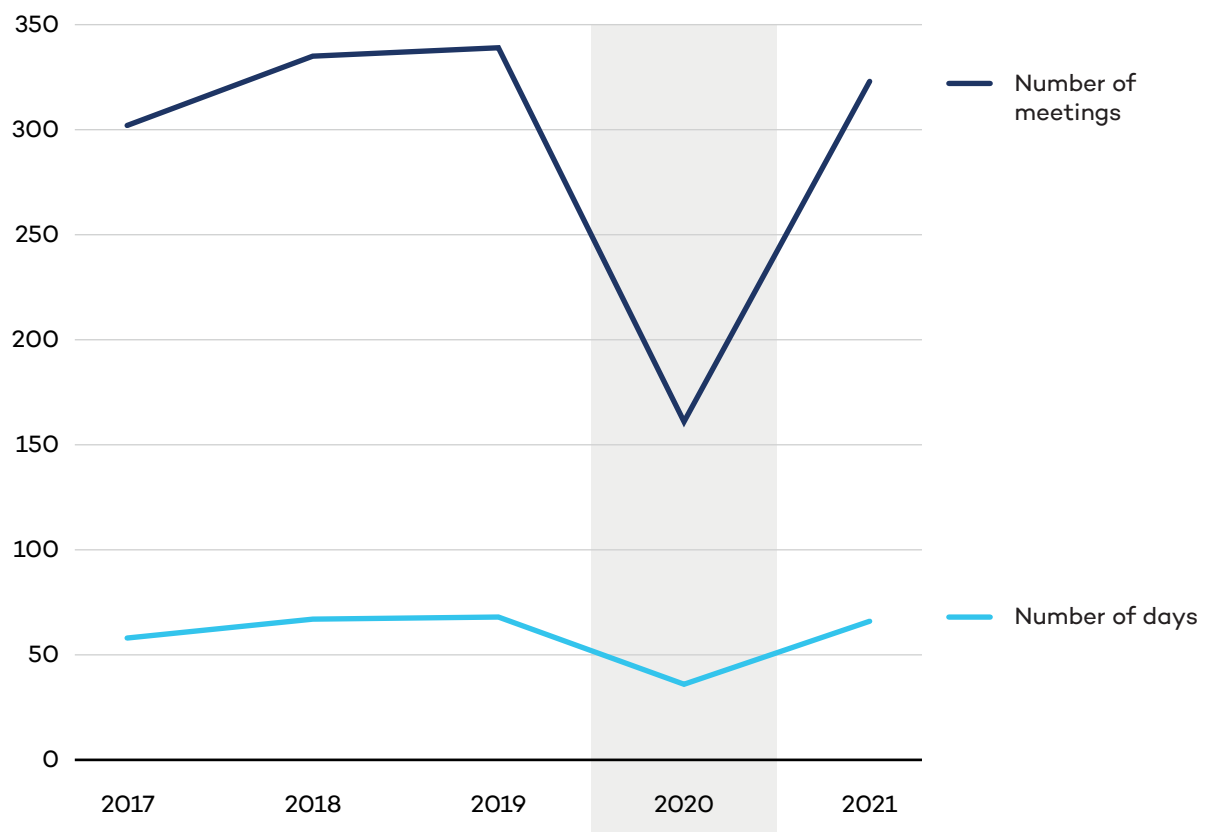
We saw the first in-person meetings since the pandemic began. The global community didn't just tiptoe into normality with a small meeting. It leapt. The IUCN World Congress was thousands strong. The UN

Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) saw over 40,000 people registered for the Glasgow COP. The venue only accommodated 10,000. Queues and complaints ensued. On the streets, up to 100,000 citizens marched for climate justice.

These forays into something nearing normal were test runs for the year to come. There were COVID cases at the Glasgow COP, but they had [little impact on local case rates](#). More face-to-face meetings are very likely in 2022, with the new regimen of daily testing, masks, and physical distancing. Some dates are likely to shift, if (or when) pandemic conditions change. This is still a time of flux. Meeting dates and formats continue to change quickly.

We take stock of where various negotiation processes are given the continued disruptions in 2021, in Section 4. There were a fair number of meetings, but few that produced substantive outcomes. Many were informal gatherings, largely intended to keep environmental issues on political agendas. Countries inched forward on key issues, where they could. Important procedural decisions helped keep work programmes moving forward. The [IPCC adopted a landmark report](#), as part of the Sixth Assessment Report, again warning us of the depth and urgency of the climate crisis.

**Figure 1.** The impact of COVID-19 on ENB meeting coverage



Source: Author's calculations

Environmental destruction does not relent, even in the face of a world-altering pandemic. While governance stalled, the impacts of the climate, nature, and pollution crises were ever clearer. [Postcards from a World on Fire](#) documents 193 climate-fuelled disasters across the globe. My hometown in northern Canada found itself under a “heat dome.” Temperatures reached 41°C; we’re far more accustomed to -41°C. More than 600 people died across the

province, and [650,000 farm animals died](#) near my hometown. Similar stories played out around the world, as floods and fires, droughts and storms caused upheaval. Many communities don’t have the advantages of a strong public safety net to support them during such times of loss. The pandemic will be over, one day, but the environmental crises are just heating up.

We rightly look to global institutions to address global problems. As ENB



turns 30, we stand firm in our belief that multilateralism is the way forward. Global problems are increasingly intertwined. We document the growing inequalities amplified by the pandemic and how they threaten environmental outcomes in Section 3. Over 2020, these connections strengthened. In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council [recognized the universal right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment](#), with legal consequences that could affect environmental negotiations in years to come.

There is a clear trend in how global institutions are governing global environmental problems—pledging (see Section 2). It’s been around for some time, notably enshrined in the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change. In 2021, pledging seemed even more dominant. Perhaps it was a useful default, given that countries couldn’t get together to negotiate and adopt global rules. But to me, at least, it felt more fundamental. Most major meetings during the year revolved around pledges.

Pledges are promises. There can be guidelines to make them more consistent and even rules about reporting back. But ultimately, they are promises about what will happen in the future. The gap between promises and action is inescapable. While countries made climate promises in Glasgow, and countries and companies pledged “energy compacts” in New York, they also [increased investment in fossil fuel production](#).

Perhaps, this gap is fuelling the rise in climate litigation: 2021 saw many [significant decisions](#). In the Netherlands, the Hague District Court ordered Shell to reduce its emissions by 45% by 2030 across all activities and scopes, marking the first time a company has been ordered to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions in line with IPCC reports and Paris Agreement goals. National and international courts have been expanding states’ duties of care regarding climate change, setting important precedents for future litigation. With litigation on nature and biodiversity also on the rise, we may see further landmark decisions in the year ahead.

We try to imagine 2022 to conclude the report. This year, it seems we are on more solid ground than last year...but to be fair, we have yet to be right in our predictions. The bar is comfortably low. 2022 could be a bumper year for environmental governance: new frameworks to govern nature and chemicals management; more climate ambition; new negotiations launched to address marine plastics and to establish a science-policy body for chemicals. And just in time, as the UN Environment Programme turns 50 and we mark 50 years since the landmark UN Conference on the Human Environment, which put environmental issues on the global agenda.

Ideally, we will end 2022 as happy as one little girl at the Cincinnati Zoo, who [finally got to meet](#) her world-famous namesake: [Fiona the Hippo](#).



# Pinkie Promises and Patchwork Pledges

A notable feature of global environmental governance in 2021 was the ongoing prominence of voluntary pledges. Whether known as “pledges,” “contributions,” “voluntary commitments” or, in one case “compacts,” flexibility is central. Those making the pledge choose the content, with little or no international oversight. They are also flexible in terms of participation. States and non-government stakeholders such as corporations, local governments, and civil society organizations can all make a pledge.

Pledging has become a popular way to govern the environment. For its proponents, it also shortcuts protracted negotiations, raises awareness, and catalyses engagement from non-party stakeholders.

## Formalizing Pledges

For some processes, pledges are expected and even required. The most prominent case is climate change. Countries’ long-awaited new and updated nationally determined contributions (NDCs) were due before the [Glasgow Climate Change Conference](#) in November. The total effort left many uninspired. According to the [UNFCCC synthesis report](#), even if the new and updated NDCs are achieved, emissions will increase

13.7% above 2010 levels by 2030. If this was the first test of the Paris Agreement, few gave countries top marks.

Countries agreed to (re-)submit more ambitious NDCs before COP 27 in Egypt. This exhortation, along with the onset of the technical phase of the first Global Stocktake in 2022, could inspire more and stronger pledges in the coming months. As 2021 ended, [not all countries had submitted their new or updated NDC](#).

Elsewhere in 2021, pledges continued to roll in under established frameworks. The [voluntary commitment registry under the UN Ocean Conference](#) re-launched in anticipation of the 2022 UN Ocean Conference. Far from ocean issues, some countries submitted their voluntary national land degradation neutrality (LDN) targets under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), in advance of UNCCD COP 15 in 2022. From non-state actors, we’ve seen—and will continue to see—pledges under the [Sharm El-Sheikh to Kunming Action Agenda](#), in the lead-up to the Convention on Biological Diversity’s COP 15 to be held in 2022.

Many look to 2022 as the year when the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework

will be adopted. Here too, pledges seem to be on the table. Circulated in July 2021, the [first detailed draft](#) includes a set of goals and targets, supported by enabling conditions and means of implementation, including financial resources, capacity, and technology. [Options to enhance planning, reporting, and review mechanisms](#) under consideration envisage national commitments and additional non-state actor commitments. These pledge-based proposals will accompany the submission of national reports and the updating of national biodiversity strategies and action plans, the primary mechanism for national planning under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Meanwhile, some observers have called for the next arrangements for the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM), which expired in 2020, to be a “[Paris Agreement for chemicals](#).” SAICM is a voluntary partnership; it too could take the pledging route. But given the wide range of chemicals and products, realizing this option could prove difficult.

Outside the more formal world of negotiations, pledging featured heavily in 2021. The [Food Systems Summit](#) and the [High-Level Dialogue on Energy](#) were voluntary commitment processes established through the UN General Assembly. Both convened in September 2021 and solicited commitments from states as well as non-state actors. Under the Food Systems Summit,

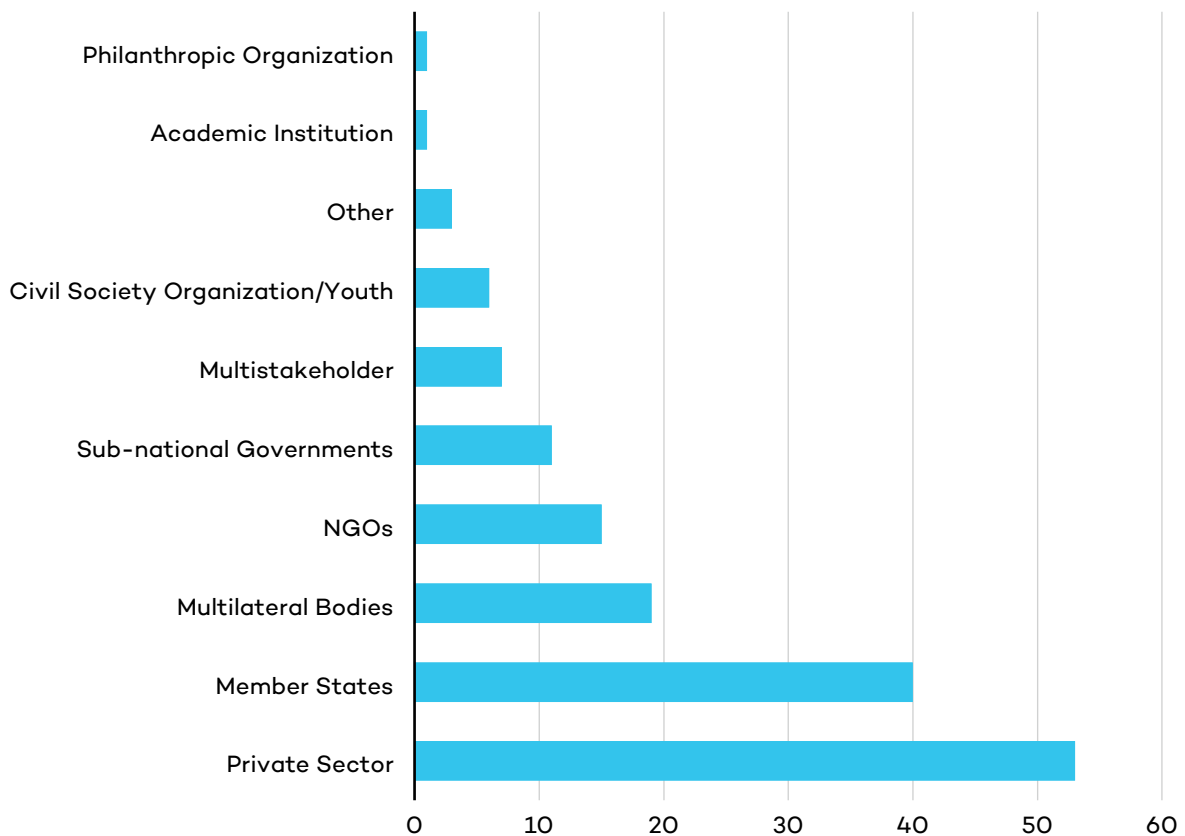
234 voluntary commitments were made as of the end of 2021.

At the High-Level Dialogue on Energy, world leaders announced more than 150 “energy compacts” reflecting voluntary targets and commitments toward achieving SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy for all), which were reportedly worth more than USD 400 billion. Under each process, a commitment registry has been established, but otherwise there does not appear to be a clear process for monitoring and evaluating progress on, and achievement of, the commitments.

## Taking the Initiative

What happens when the official pledges fall short? At COP 26, world leaders attempted to fill the void in climate ambition with even more pledges and commitments, including the [Glasgow Declaration on Forests and Land Use](#), the [Global Methane Pledge](#), the launch of the [Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance](#), and net zero pledges. Non-state actors joined the flurry, making their own pledges under the [Race to Zero](#) and [Race to Resilience](#) campaigns. An optimistic analysis released during COP 26 indicated these pledges, if fulfilled, could mean that limiting global climate change to [1.8°C by 2100](#) is within reach. Perhaps more realistic accounts estimated [2.4°C](#) of global warming.

**Figure 2.** Tallying up the energy compact pledgers



Source: Data from the [UN Energy Compact Registry](#)

## New Pledges, Same Problems?

Voluntary commitments have a mixed record in global environmental governance. One issue is whether pledges in fact represent additional action. Some past pledges repackaged existing actions. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the US “Forests for the Future” pledge of USD 150 million to

combat deforestation represented no new money, but a re-branding of existing US overseas aid funds.

Some new pledges seem very near to old ones. After the Glasgow Declaration on Forests and Land Use was announced, civil society (and others) quickly noted the [similarities to previous promises](#) to end or halve deforestation. The New York



Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah signs a pledge in Glasgow.

Declaration on Forests promised in 2014 to halve deforestation in 2020 and halt it by 2030. The 2020 target was missed, like Aichi Target 5 that set out to halve ecosystem loss (including forests) by 2020. [Efforts are not on track to meet the 2030 target.](#)

A second issue is transparency: how is progress monitored and evaluated? The Paris Agreement has a well-developed framework for transparency, implementation, and compliance. These apply to the NDCs, but not the various other initiatives announced in Glasgow. The transparency arrangements under the Food Summit and Energy Dialogue are unclear. The effectiveness of national targets under the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework may hinge on its transparency and accountability arrangements. For pledges made outside a formal process, issues of monitoring, implementation, and transparency are even more germane.

Transparency is even more difficult when non-state actors are pledging. In climate, more non-state actors than ever are pledging, but the ambition of the pledges remains the same, according to the [2021 Yearbook for Global Climate Action](#). The energy, food, biodiversity, and other pledges from companies, cities, and civil society may need to confront this issue to maintain credibility. Perhaps for this reason, UN Secretary-General António Guterres announced a group that will [scrutinize the net zero pledges made by non-state actors](#). He's joined by other initiatives seeking to bring transparency

to climate pledges. The [Climate Progress News Barrel](#) tracks real world efforts on NDCs, but also on finance, and business efforts, among others.

Despite these well-known questions, the allure of pledges evidently remains strong. For many, they still hold the promise of catalyzing political will into action, creating new partnerships, enabling broad participation, and allowing for agile mobilization. In 2022, we may yet see more evidence of pledges' popularity—and of whether pledges lead to positive change for the environment.



# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS





# Growing Inequities: Mapping the need for a renewed multilateralism

Global environmental governance does not happen in a vacuum. [In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres](#), “the virus has thrived because poverty, discrimination, the destruction of our natural environment and other human rights failures have created enormous fragilities in our societies.” Socioeconomic disparities, geopolitical tensions, and broader equity issues amplify environmental injustices and outcomes. As highlighted in 2021, these trends will be even more salient in the years to come, complicating efforts to build back better.

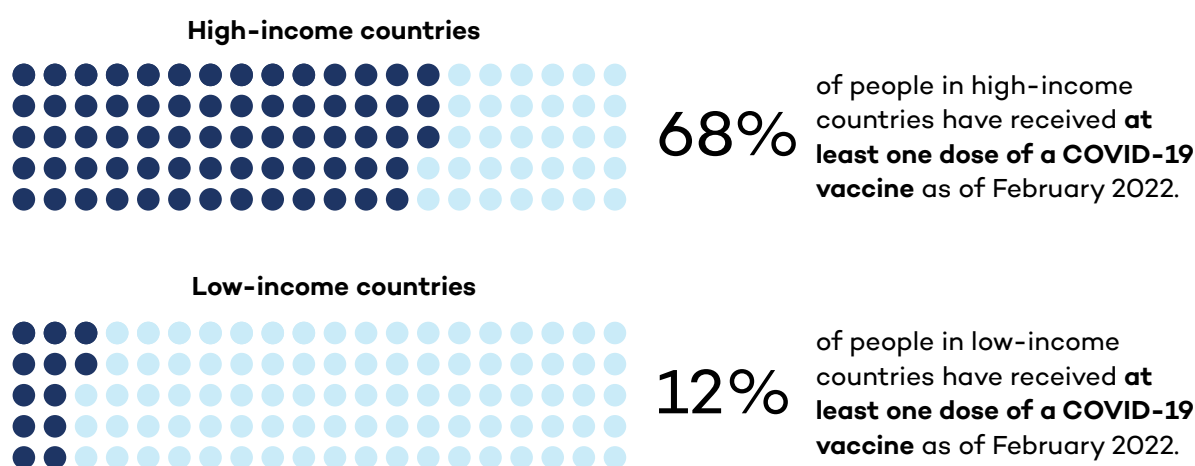
Back in 2015, elimination of poverty was considered an ambitious but doable Sustainable Development Goal (SDG). The impacts of the pandemic reversed decades of progress on this and other SDGs. [Extreme poverty is now on the rise](#), as are food insecurity and [unemployment](#). The FAO notes a [dramatic worsening in world hunger](#). UNESCO speaks of the need to address equitably the [most severe global education disruption in history](#). The World Bank documents [rising poverty and widening inequality both between and within countries](#). [The pandemic has led to a](#)

[multidimensional crisis](#), affecting particularly the most vulnerable such as Indigenous Peoples, refugees, and migrants.

Vaccine inequity has become a symbol of failing multilateralism amidst a truly global—but theoretically manageable—crisis. Tools existed, as safe and effective vaccines were developed in record time. We failed to share them fairly. Despite [WHO efforts](#), the vaccination gap remains vast. [Proposals to temporarily waive](#) intellectual property rights for COVID-related patents under the [TRIPS Agreement](#) stalled when some developed countries blocked the suggestion.

These developments have repercussions in the environmental field. Analysis and knowledge on the [inequalities-environment nexus](#) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is burgeoning. Research has long highlighted the socio-economic root causes of biodiversity loss, including that [economic inequality predicts biodiversity loss](#). As the international community [resumes efforts to develop a new global biodiversity framework](#), such considerations are central. The [Berlin Forum on Chemicals and Sustainability](#) showcased the serious impacts hazardous

**Figure 3.** Vaccine inequity



Source: [WHO Global Dashboard for Vaccine Equity](#)

chemicals and chemical mismanagement have on people’s health and the environment, with many ministers underlining the marginalized suffer the most.

Global economic and financial systems, including intellectual property rights (IPRs), underpin both the global mismanagement of the pandemic and the gap in addressing major environmental challenges, including climate change and biodiversity loss. For climate, developed countries failed to meet their promised USD 100 billion by 2020 threshold, undermining trust at the [COP 26 negotiations in Glasgow](#).

In the CBD realm, highly politicized deliberations on benefit-sharing from the use of [digital sequence information on](#)

[genetic resources](#) link to trade and IPR considerations but, importantly, go back to the fundamental question: who benefits from scientific progress and how are the results shared?

Equity-related considerations have taken centre stage both within and outside environmental negotiations. Equity demands are now central in the environmental movement, as witnessed in the mobilizations in the streets of Glasgow focusing on climate justice. In the negotiating process itself, [virtual negotiations were affected by digital inequality](#), including issues of Internet connectivity in developing countries and in rural areas. Virtual settings worked well for small consultations and knowledge exchanges. But they amplified inequalities



Extinction Rebellion protesters at the Glasgow Climate Change Conference.

evident in face-to-face negotiations, with smaller delegations from developing countries often facing more hurdles. While the number of registered participants for online meetings was often higher than in face-to-face meetings, effective participation was limited, due to time zone differences and insufficient time, reducing the ability of non-state actors to participate and interact with government representatives. Hybrid conferences, such as the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, were also less inclusive than past climate conferences. Here too, registration exceeded expectations and the meeting venue's capacity. Most observers were able to participate in negotiations through the online platform only.

We heard louder calls for human rights-based approaches to environmental protection. A new era for these issues may now be underway, with the adopted [resolution on the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment by the UN Human Rights Council](#), and the establishment of a Special Rapporteur to monitor human rights in the context of the climate emergency. Human rights issues were repeated sticking points in Glasgow and are expected to feature in 2022's biodiversity negotiations. It remains to be seen whether this development will promote equity in environmental negotiations, including by promoting rights-based approaches in tackling global environmental crises.



# Stocktake: Where does global governance stand?

The emergence of vaccines in late 2020 revived the hope of substantive, in-person work for negotiations in 2021. But vaccine inequity and evolving COVID-19 variants across the world keep lengthening the road to regular meetings. With some notable exceptions, negotiations remained virtual this year. This meant slow, or almost non-existent, progress for many multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Some processes could only approve procedural decisions. Others continued virtual, informal discussions, hoping an eventual in-person meeting would build on the informal work. A rare few made substantive decisions in virtual or hybrid settings, lighting some hope that negotiations might progress despite the ongoing pandemic.

## Making it Happen, Online and Offline

First, the good news: three MEAs were able to hold in-person meetings, thus finishing off 2021 with substantial decisions under their belts. This was a relief, especially considering the *annus terribilis* of 2020.

In September, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's [World Conservation Congress](#) adopted the

Marseille Manifesto on the climate and biodiversity emergencies, as well as 28 resolutions on a range of conservation and sustainable development issues. With nearly 6,000 delegates, it was closely watched as a bellwether of future in-person meetings.

On the heels of the IUCN's success, the [Glasgow Climate Change Conference](#) (UNFCCC COP 26) brought almost 40,000 delegates together in November. Negotiations were divisive, but parties managed to finalize the Paris Agreement Rulebook as well as adopt decisions on a range of important matters including finance, loss and damage, and closing the ambition gap—albeit begrudgingly for some, who adopted the package “in the spirit of compromise.”

The year finished off with the [Barcelona Convention's COP 22](#), which met in Turkey and adopted the [Post-2020 Strategic Action Programme for the Conservation of Biological Diversity and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources in the Mediterranean Region](#) to strengthen marine protected areas and species and habitat conservation; measures to combat pollution and marine litter; and a proposal to the International Maritime Organization to

designate the Mediterranean as an emission control area for sulphur oxides.

Building on last year's lessons, a number of scientific bodies showcased the concrete possibilities of virtual engagement. In what one delegate described as “the most well-organized [online] approval process the Panel has ever seen,” the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reviewed and approved a [Summary for Policymakers for its Working Group I report](#)—no mean feat, considering the tens of thousands of comments the draft received. The [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) approved scoping reports for its nexus and thematic assessments, as well as the interim work plans of its five taskforces for the next two years.

## Multilateral Maintenance Mode

The less good news: [as it did in 2020](#), COVID-19 backed most processes into a corner. Given the difficulties in negotiating and adopting substantive decisions in a virtual setting, meetings of the Minamata Convention, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, and the UN Environment Assembly instead produced procedural decisions approving programmes of work, budgets, and medium-term strategies. These all matter greatly. They quite literally keep the lights on and multilateralism moving forward while we wait for a return to in-person negotiations. But they are not the

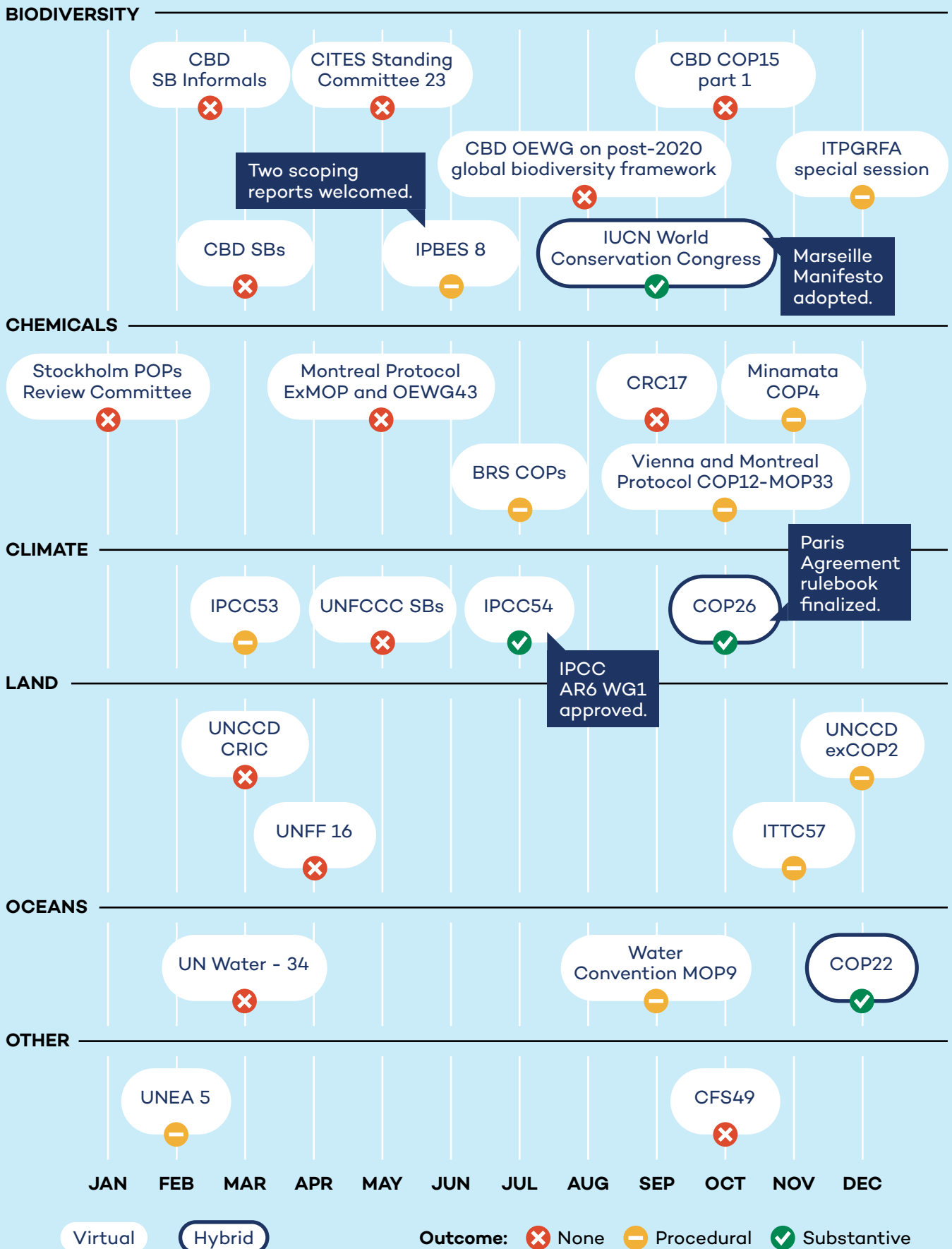
substantive decisions that were originally hoped for.

For some, the year was an opportunity to advance discussions toward a more significant agreement. The CBD held several online meetings over the year, including negotiating sessions and numerous webinars and thematic consultations, largely focused on informing the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework due to be approved at CBD COP 15.

If most negotiations did not advance as quickly as participants would have hoped, 2021 still gave us the benefit of keeping countries talking; the Glasgow Climate Change Conference, for one, showed that months of extra virtual work on the rules of emissions trading [can lead to much swifter resolutions](#) in negotiation rooms.

Yet more time may not necessarily be better for other processes. Biodiversity loss, chemical pollution, and the illegal trade of endangered species have not stopped for the pandemic, and interim budgets will not restore them. As the waves of the Omicron variant reach every shore, the question still hangs in the mist—how long can virtual processes continue without substantive outcomes?

Figure 4. Making Do in 2022: Events and outcomes



Source: Author's calculations.



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## Looking to 2022

“Busy” might be a massive understatement for 2022. After two years of postponed meetings, there is a backlog of conferences and decisions. There is a sense we’ve reached the limit of what online meetings can do. We’re keeping tabs on 36 major negotiation sessions until the end of September alone. There are more negotiations scheduled in the first nine months of 2022 than what we saw in all of 2021.

Fifty years after the landmark UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm put environmental issues on the global agenda, 2022 may itself prove to be a vital year for environmental governance. We could see a new biodiversity framework, a new treaty on marine biodiversity, a new chemicals management framework, and initiatives to strengthen scientific advice on chemicals management. For nature and chemicals especially, 2022 could be another landmark year.

Plastics will be a key word of 2022. The UN Environment Assembly could launch negotiations for a new treaty on marine plastics. The scope is hotly debated—is it about the waste, or plastic production too? Hopefully countries will turn off the tap as the tub overflows. Some treaty bodies are already acting on plastics. The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants will continue to consider banning or

restricting chemicals that are used in plastics. The Basel Convention that regulates transboundary waste already listed plastics, meaning countries have more information and ability to say no to plastic imports; work to make this information mechanism even stronger will continue in 2022.

And this is just the highlight reel. With the huge number of meetings going ahead, there will be negotiations to iron out agreements across the board. Whether deserts or oceans, global rules will be debated and (hopefully) adopted. The wheels are turning again.



John Kerry, US, and Xie Zhenhua, China, will likely remain key figures in 2022.

**Table 1.** Possible highlights of 2022

Meeting	Possible outcomes
UN Environment Assembly	Launch negotiations for a marine plastics treaty Launch negotiations for a science-policy body for chemicals Resolutions on nature-based solutions, and green recovery and a sustainable recovery.
International Conference on Chemicals Management	New framework for managing chemicals beyond 2020
Convention on Biological Diversity COP15	Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework
UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ)	New legally binding instrument
IPBES	Assessment reports on values and on sustainable use
IPCC	Working Group II (impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability) and III (mitigation) reports Sixth Assessment Report
World Trade Organization	Agreement on fisheries subsidies

Surprisingly, things look relatively quieter on the climate front. The IPCC will hopefully adopt two more Working Group contributions to the Sixth Assessment Report, followed by the adoption of the full Sixth Assessment Report. The Climate Change COP in Egypt is all about early implementation efforts under the Paris Agreement, with a spotlight on finance, loss and damage, and amped-up mitigation targets. After so many years of negotiating (and re-negotiating) climate rules, it's time to focus completely on implementation.

It is a year for birthdays, too. ENB will be 30. UNEP turns 50. UNEP's [timeline](#) shows

how far global environmental governance has come in five decades. But it's not enough. Across the board, we're exceeding the carrying capacity of the Earth. Inequalities are rising as a direct result of—and are a further contributor to—a degraded planet. The downward spiral requires innovation, political will, and [tackling inequalities woven into environmental issues](#).

The pandemic fragmented our world. 2022 holds the potential to bring people together (literally and figuratively) to galvanize action for a green recovery. It could be an *annus mirabilis*. A year of marvels.



