State of Global Environmental Governance 2020

International Institute for Sustainable Development,

Earth Negotiations Bulletin

IISD
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Edited by Jen Allan, PhD

Contributing authors:
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Tanya Rosen
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Earth Negotiations Bulletin

Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB) is a trusted source of information about global environmental negotiations. It provides a variety of multimedia informational resources for sustainable development policymakers, including daily coverage of international negotiations, analyses, and photos. ENB is recognized for its objectivity and expertise in international environment and sustainable development policy. The various products provided by ENB make it an essential source of information for government officials, decision makers, UN staff, non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations, business, and academia

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State of Global Environmental Governance 2020

February 2021

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Selwin Hart
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Foreword

The world needs an urgent course correction. However, as we enter 2021, there is cause for hope that this correction can be achieved.

Undeniably, we remain off-track to achieve the objectives of the Paris Agreement, and the pandemic has set back progress across many of the Sustainable Development Goals.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has said very bluntly that we are waging a war on nature. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed not only our unsustainable use and destructive use of natural resources, it also showed the consequences of the endemic inequalities that exist between and with countries. More and more, we see nature is striking back: rising temperatures, wildfires, floods, cyclones, and hurricanes are a devastating new normal.

Fossil fuel production continues to rise by 2% annually, when it needs to be falling by 6% every year. Countries are providing more financing for fossil fuel subsidies than for renewable energy.

But there are signs of change. As the world experiences the ever-accelerating impacts of climate change—and the rising costs of inaction—more governments, businesses, investors, and civil society leaders are stepping up their level of ambition and action.

More and more countries are recognizing that there is an urgent need to vastly scale up their climate efforts, and we are encouraged by recent announcements from several major emitters and many global businesses committing to carbon neutrality, as the Secretary-General and many others have been urging. We enter 2021 with countries producing over half of global CO2 emissions now committed to a net zero future, with this figure set to rise to two-thirds early in 2021.

The recent Climate Ambition Summit, held to mark the five-year anniversary of the Paris Agreement, has sent strong signals that more countries and more businesses are ready to take the bold climate action on which our future security and prosperity depend.

As we look ahead, the central objective of the United Nations for 2021 is to build a truly global coalition for carbon neutrality, for global net zero emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050. But pledges are just the first step. Now, all countries must show ambition in their new and enhanced national determined contributions that they are obliged to submit ahead of COP26. The pledges must be backed up by real action now.

This transition must be just, with social protection and support for workers and others affected by decarbonization. And reducing emissions is only part of the

Photo: Juan Manuel Herrera/OAS (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

challenge—we need to adapt to the impacts that climate change is bringing and build resilience that can save lives and property. The Secretary-General has called for a breakthrough on adaptation and resilience that prioritizes the needs of those on the frontlines of the climate crisis. All donors and multilateral development banks (MDBs) should commit to direct at least 50% of their climate finance support toward adaptation and resilience building.

As we move forward into 2021, finance for climate action needs to rise significantly. Developed countries need to meet their pledge of at least USD 100 billion a year to developing countries, for both reducing emissions and building resilience. All MDBs and public development banks should commit to align their policies, portfolios, and projects with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

The scientific community tells us that to reach net zero by 2050, we need to cut emissions by 45% by 2030 compared with 2010 levels. Now it is time for every country, city, financial institution, and company to adopt plans for transitioning to net zero emissions by 2050, backed by the actions that will make that happen.

A report such as this helps us to take stock of the year that was, such as it was. We can learn from one another. Since 1992, the Earth Negotiations Bulletin team has spent countless hours in negotiation rooms, covering nearly every meeting on the major environmental issues. This year, they too moved online. In this report, they look across the various processes that negotiate rules to address our most urgent crises. They distill what 2020 meant for the world around us, and for our ability to respond to the threats posed by it.

I commend this vital work, as it is crucial that the world has clear-eyed and objective facts available from many sources on which to base the decisions that will determine our present and our future. In 2021, on the long and challenging road to Glasgow, the stakes are higher than ever. But so, too, the opportunities greater than ever—for people, prosperity, and planet—if we get these decisions right.

Introduction

What's left to say about 2020? When we published our State of Global Environmental Governance report last year, 2020 held potential to be a turning point. The Paris Agreement would start governing the global response to climate change. Biodiversity anticipated a "Super Year." There were hopes for a new treaty on marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction, as well as a new post-2020 global biodiversity framework to guide the future of nature protection. Back in 2019's heady optimism, it seemed fine to take stock and look toward to a potentially momentous year.

The year started off as planned. The "Super Year" kicked off in Gandhinagar, India, at the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals conference (CMS COP13). Then, the pandemic started to creep into the world of multilateral meetings. In late February, delegates negotiating the zero draft of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework had their temperatures checked as they entered the venue in Rome. After the Green Climate Fund met in mid-March, several participants tested positive; Liberia's first case of COVID-19 was traced to the meeting. Global lockdowns, travel restrictions, and meeting postponements surged.

Multilateralism seemingly ground to a halt. A system centered on convening hundreds, if not tens of thousands of delegates was no longer possible. Over a million people lost their lives and the toll on public health and economies continues to unfold. The global community tried to address the climate and biodiversity crises amid a rapidly growing health crisis.

Negotiations went online. Delegates and scientists worked from home. Living rooms around the world became the venues for global governance. As we document in section 2, Secretariats innovated. They used a range of procedures and software to try to advance discussions on key issues. Decisions on budgets were prioritized to keep the wheels of multilateralism turning. Some substantive decisions were made, though mostly by smaller bodies focused on implementation. Working across time zones and relying on sometimes patchy internet connections, ensuring everyone could participate became a pressing concern.

Speaking as someone used to sitting in negotiations or lurking outside rooms for "intel," it is now extremely difficult to trace what is and is not happening. Transparency is at a premium in the online world. Our team hopes this report can help shed some light on how the UN system coped and what took place in 2020.

We saw some political commitment peek through the grim news about the unfolding health, climate, and biodiversity crises. The Leaders' Pledge for Nature, adopted in September, shows high-level political commitment to protect biodiversity. Leaders from 75 countries and the EU pledged to achieve the vision of Living in Harmony with Nature by 2050. They recognize this will take political will and transformative action.

Many of the same leaders "met" online three months later to signal climate ambition on the fifth anniversary of the adoption of the Paris Agreement. 2020 marked the Agreement's first test. By December 31, 2020, countries were encouraged to bring forward more ambitious pledges. Like students with looming homework, but little oversight, most major emitters failed to deliver new pledges as the year wore on. After the Summit, we're left with a range of pledges. Their overall effect on global temperature rise will soon be modelled, I'm sure. But Alok Sharma, the President of the upcoming Glasgow Climate Change Conference, suggested these pledges are not enough to limit global warming to 1.5°C.

Political will is vital if we are to build back better from the pandemic. We explore how the pandemic shaped our natural world in section 3. Deforestation contributes to the transmission of zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19. The climate and nature emergencies continue, representing a longer-term threat to the environment and health than the current pandemic.

This crisis has perhaps permanently changed our societies. Lives and livelihoods around the world were lost or harmed. Social inequalities worsened. We rediscovered the importance of good health and strong connections with family and friends. Governments rediscovered their credit lines, expanding the size of national debts and the role of the state in our lives. Big government is back, with lasting implications.

Big governments could enact green recoveries. Emissions rose after the 2008-2009 financial crisis, despite green stimulus spending by the US, China, and the EU. The EU and the Republic of Korea have already announced their recoveries will be green. Many have emphasized the need for economic stimulus packages that promote an equitable transition to renewable energy and nature protection while creating jobs. To what extent governments lock in a greener, more equitable future will be a question for our 2021 edition.

We conclude this report with a look ahead to 2021 and beyond. This is probably foolhardy. As this report goes to press, most meetings for 2021 are only tentatively scheduled; little seems sure. Yet if we've learned anything from this current crisis, it is that we can adapt rapidly. Perhaps next year, we will be able to report that leaders took the same urgency of combatting COVID-19 to the fight against environmental crises.

UN
DP
Empowered live
Resilient natio
UN
programme
Convention on
Biological Divers

Negotiating During a Pandemic

Face-to-face communication is the foundation of international negotiations. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the practices and procedures meant to ensure effective, equitable, and transparent negotiations. Suddenly, global environmental governance went online.

The disruption highlighted many issues. How can countries legally take decisions that would normally require physical presence? What platforms would be most secure? How can Secretariats ensure participation, especially given time zones and unequal internet access? Is simultaneous translation possible? Perhaps most importantly, participants wondered whether virtual "coffee breaks" and "break out groups" could substitute for their physical equivalents, where negotiators huddle shoulder-to-shoulder to broker consensus.

The answers to these questions varied. Secretariats and organizers postponed meetings (Figure 1). The character and purpose of other meetings shifted, from negotiations to informal discussions and mandated events. A few, smaller bodies made the digital leap, adopting decisions to provide funding or to make science-based recommendations.

The "Silence" Procedure

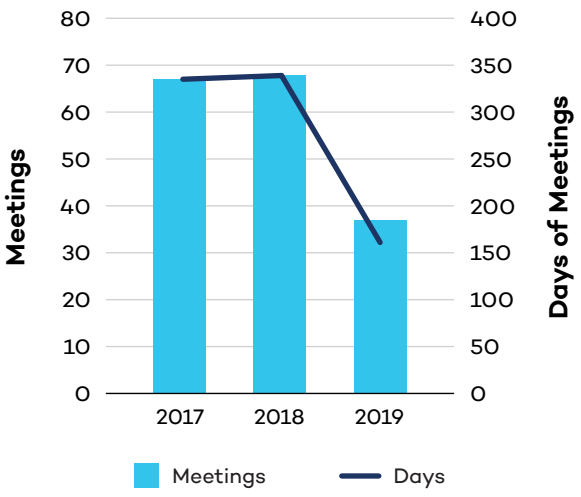
Despite its name, the "silence procedure" still requires communication. The silence procedure is a tool for negotiators to indicate tentative agreement on a text. It permits all countries a final chance to object by a specified date and time (i.e., to break the silence), which sends negotiators back to the negotiating table. Delegates transmit the full proposed draft to their capital for final review.

UN diplomats were familiar with the silence procedure. Before the pandemic, a draft resolution placed under the silence procedure would still undergo a formal (in-person) voting procedure if no country broke the silence by the deadline. During in-person negotiations, the timeline to submit an objection was usually 24 hours, after which its adoption was assumed, but formal voting still took place.

After the pandemic started, the UN General Assembly was one of the first to adjust the silence procedure. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) agreed physical voting was no longer required. Draft resolutions would be adopted through the silence procedure alone, which would now last several days.

Photo: IISD/Kiara Worth

Figure 1. The Impact of COVID-19 on ENB Meeting Coverage



Source: Author's calculations

Several organizations incorporated the silence procedure into their planning, hoping it could deliver much needed, often operational decisions. Budgets and work programmes are enormously important. They set the mandates for work in the coming year and provide the resources to do it. Without an agreed budget, Secretariats cannot function.

Both the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF) and the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) second "extraordinary" Conference of the Parties (COP) used the silence procedure to adopt operational decisions. The UNFF omnibus decision covered six out of the 13 originally anticipated agenda items. It keeps the Forum moving forward operationally and mandates the Secretariat to continue work on key initiatives. The CBD limited itself to the budget. After 72 hours, Brazil broke the silence by submitting a written objection to reflect the uncertainty of the format of future meetings and the budgetary implications. After informal consultations and a further 48 hours of a silence procedure, parties adopted the budget.

Going Online

Many bodies ventured into the world of online negotiations. Halting discussions risked stalling progress and political momentum. The combination of backroom diplomatic channels and pre-recorded statements managed to generate some sense the world was still committed to climate and biodiversity action.

Still, substantive decisions were few. Generally, the fewer involved in the decisions, the better virtual decision-making worked. Larger bodies changed tack, using online forums mostly to check off the easier aspects of their agendas.

Building Political Momentum

Leaders had lot on their plates, but there was widespread acknowledgement the climate and biodiversity crises cannot wait for the pandemic to end. It was crucial leaders show the pandemic had not stopped global environmental action.

Climate ambition was anemic throughout 2020, leaving many to question whether the Paris Agreement could ratchet up ambition. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Climate Ambition Summit—a new event, not envisioned before the pandemic—tried to rescue countries' collective record. Countries pledged 45 targets or plans relating to nationally determined contributions, including from the EU, China, and the UK. Beyond these pledges, speeches outlined 24 new net zero emissions commitments, and 20 new adaptation and resilience plans. Climate finance pledges spilled out, from the UK, Germany, France, Italy, Portugal, Finland, Luxembourg, and Monaco, as well as the European Investment Bank and World Bank.

The need for biodiversity action is as urgent. 2020 was to be a celebration year, when countries would adopt new initiatives to protect nature. The UN Secretary-General still hosted a Biodiversity Summit. The original goal was the galvanize momentum toward an ambitious post-2020 global biodiversity framework. That aim remained, but took on new importance given the delay to the framework's adoption. The Leaders' Pledge for Nature, signed by 75 countries and the EU before the Summit, bolstered the effort. It includes widespread commitments to protect nature, but some megadiverse countries are missing—including Australia, the US, China (the host of COP15), Brazil, and India.

Prompting heads of state and government to make new, more ambitious commitments involves considerable diplomacy. These words matter. In the future, NGOs and other countries will hold these countries to these pledges. While the format was new—a series of pre-recorded statements beamed through the internet—traditional diplomacy made the announcements possible.

Paring Down Negotiations

Political momentum is one thing. Negotiation is another. The interpersonal element is important. Side discussions and impromptu proposals are often key to breaking an impasse. A virtual environment seems ill-suited for crafting new rules.

The subsidiary bodies of the UNFCCC and CBD are large meetings; participants outnumber the COPs of other processes. Like many major meetings, these bodies are waiting until face-to-face discussions can go ahead.

Secretariats convened informal discussions to try to inch countries toward agreement. These were not official discussions or even necessarily meant to directly feed into the formal negotiations. For example, a virtual intersessional work programme is working toward mutual understanding to fast-track agreement on the treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ), which was originally due in 2020.

At the Climate Dialogues, some parties-only consultations were reported to be constructive. Most of the "informal dialogues" related to transparency and reporting, as well as Article 6 (market and non-market mechanisms). These are central issues to make the Paris Agreement fully operational. Finance was missing. Crucial for developing countries, negotiations for a new collective finance goal are set to begin at the next meeting.

The Virtual Sessions of the CBD Subsidiary Bodies became a forum for parties to share news on their implementation efforts. Participants tested a party-led review process online. Climate delegates attended various mandated events—meetings requested by parties to discuss or highlight a given issue—at the June Momentum for Climate Change and the Climate Dialogues. Both the CBD and UNFCCC meetings were generally presentation based, with a question-and-answer session. Such formats work well in a virtual setting. Secretariats and countries ticked some of the events off their to-do lists, but many negotiation issues remain outstanding for 2021.

Full Speed (and Agenda) Ahead

For some, the virtual environment posed less of a challenge. The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) pivoted its review of the Sustainable Development Goals to focus on the impacts of the pandemic, but it kept a full agenda and even coordinated a full slate of side events.

Despite the HLPF's success, smaller bodies with fewer members involved in decisions fared better in the online environment than larger counterparts. Most substantive decisions of 2020 came from these implementation-focused bodies.

The *Ad-hoc* Open-ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics successfully concluded its work. It agreed to a list of options to address marine litter and microplastics, including a new treaty. The UN Environment Assembly will now have to weigh these options and decide next steps. The 9th session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP9) to ASCOBANS adopted decisions on the critically endangered Harbour Porpoise population of the Baltic proper, on marine debris, and on food availability and resource depletion.

Funding bodies like the Green Climate Fund and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) managed to adopt several key decisions. The GEF benefitted from a trial run in June with a pared down agenda. Returning with a full agenda for its 59th Council session, the Council approved 62 projects and programs totaling USD 409.2 million. Negotiations for the eighth replenishment of the GEF Trust Fund kicked off online.

Continuing Intersessional Work

Several bodies sought to continue as best they could by securing mandates for

continuing intersessional work. Such work is often key to implementation, since it prepares decisions for parties' consideration and helps parties fulfill their obligations.

Some smaller bodies already had set mandates and work programmes and were able to move online more easily. The UNFCCC convened all its constituted bodies online. Likewise, the Chemical Review Committee adopted decisions related to two industrial chemicals used in common products like computers and non-stick cookware, decabromodiphenyl ether (decaBDE) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). Their recommendations will inform decisions by parties to the Rotterdam Convention, which enables informed trade in certain hazardous chemicals.

But for several bodies, the intersessional work took the form of presentations and agreements on mandates to continue work. The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal updated parties on the efforts of small intersessional working groups at its open-ended working group meeting. Parties adopted a new programme of work. This crucially allowed work on plastics to move ahead before its decision to make plastics subject to the Convention's prior informed consent procedure entered effect on January 1, 2021.

The Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer focused on a few implementation issues and agreed to the

The Impact of COVID-19 on Scientific Advice

Scientific advice is the lifeblood of multilateral environmental agreements. For example, early 2020 saw the completion of the Fifth Global Biodiversity Outlook, which warned none of the 2011-2020 Aichi Biodiversity Targets were met. Earlier in the year, the Nobel Peace Prize-nominated Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services called for world leaders to address the drivers of biodiversity loss, noting the cost of any impacts would be 100 times the cost of prevention. While their report does not have the same status as a global assessment, it could set the agenda moving ahead—a role often fulfilled by science.

But the pandemic poses a significant threat to how quickly scientists gather, draft, agree, and communicate their advice. Scientific bodies face additional challenges working in a virtual environment that can amplify serious structural inequalities across gender and development lines.

In the case of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) Sixth Assessment Report, the wave of successive lockdowns has led to serious delays in scientific advice being ready in time for negotiations.

membership of key committees. This will allow intersessional work to continue, while delegates wait for "part two" of the COP to meet. Similarly, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is using online tools to organize work that the intersessional working groups would have addressed even if the Plants and Animals Committees would have met.

Is Online Here to Stay?

Countries have suggested increasing the use of online meetings before 2020. Donor countries like the cost effectiveness. Developing countries worry if their internet can handle it and if they will have to be awake all night, since online meetings tend to revolve around European or North American time zones. They worry about being marginalized further from global governance. The carbon footprint of face-to-face meetings is enormous; there are clear climate and reputational benefits in less UN-related travel. Some even liked the "hybrid" HLPF, attended by thousands that otherwise would not have travelled to New York.

The unexpected forays into virtual deliberations and decisions in 2020 could boost the calls for and confidence in online meetings. 2020 has shown online meetings are imperfect, with clear limits. But some smaller, more technical bodies, hinted at the possibilities.

The outline was adopted at the end of February, but since then many contributors have been working from home. Those with caretaking responsibilities—often women—have reported significantly less time available to work. Others have been unable to access their data, which is stored on university drives. Contributors to assessments have reported working harder than ever during the pandemic, both to keep up with the literature and to fulfill their work obligations. Even with the report's draft delayed into 2021, with a final report planned for 2022, the quality of a draft written by time-stretched, volunteer contributors may suffer.

It also means negotiations for the Glasgow Climate Change Conference will take place without scientific advice to guide policymakers. Climate ambition requires sound scientific information as much as political will. It raises an essential question: how can scientific advisory bodies, such as the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) or IPCC, manage an immense workload equitably and effectively in a pandemic?

The Impact of the Pandemic on Global Environmental Governance in 2020

Meeting	Original Dates; Rescheduled Dates*	Related Virtual Sessions
Climate Change		
UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies (52nd meeting)	1-11 June 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	June Momentum for Climate Change held virtually June 2020
UNFCCC COP 26 (Glasgow Climate Change Conference)	9-19 November 2020; Rescheduled to 1-12 November 2021	Climate Dialogues and Climate Ambition Summit held virtually December 2020
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (53rd meeting)	1-4 October 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
Biodiversity		
CBD Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA 24) and Subsidiary Body on Implementation (SBI 3)	18–29 May 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	CBD Special Sessions held virtually September 2020, Informal SBSTTA 24 and SBI 3 virtual sessions planned for February and March 2021
Third meeting of the CBD Open-ended Working Group on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework	27–31 July 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
CBD COP15 (UN Biodiversity Conference)	15–28 October 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	ExCOP convened virtually in November 2020 to adopt budget using silence procedure
Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ICG 4)	23 March–3 April 2020; Rescheduled to 16–27 August 2021	Virtual event kicked off intersessional work on 14 September 2020
IUCN World Conservation Congress	11–19 June 2020; Rescheduled to 3–11 September 2021	
Summit on Biodiversity	22–23 September 2020	Virtual event took place on 30 September 2020
CITES Animals and Plants Committees and Joint Session	13–23 July 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	

Meeting	Original Dates; Rescheduled Dates*	Related Virtual Sessions
CITES Standing Committee (73rd meeting)	5–9 October 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
68th Meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC)	25 September–2 October 2020; Rescheduled to 3–10 September 2021	
Land		
UNCCD Committee for the Review of the Implementation of the Convention (CRIC) 18	24–26 November 2020	Rescheduled as a virtual event on 15–19 March 2021
Ocean		
2020 UN Ocean Conference	2–6 June 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
Our Ocean Conference 2020	7–8 December 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
UN Open-ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (21st meeting)	22–26 June 2020; Rescheduled to 14–18 June 2021	
Chemicals and Wastes		
Intersessional Process for Considering SAICM and the Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste Beyond 2020 (4th meeting)	23–27 March 2020; Rescheduled dates TBD	
Fifth Session of the International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM 5)	5–9 October 2020; Rescheduled to 5–9 July 2021	
Basel Convention Open Ended Working Group (12th meeting)	22–25 June 2020	Virtual meeting took place 1–3 September 2020
Stockholm Convention Persistent Organic Pollutants Committee (16th meeting)	14–18 September 2020	Rescheduled as virtual meeting on 11–16 January 2021
Rotterdam Convention Chemical Review Committee (16th meeting)	September 2020	Virtual meeting took place 8–11 September 2020
Ad-hoc Open-ended Expert Group on Marine Litter and Microplastics (4th meeting)		Virtual meeting took place 9–13 November 2020

Meeting	Original Dates; Rescheduled Dates*	Related Virtual Sessions
Finance		
Global Environmental Facility Council (58th meeting)	2–4 June 2020	Virtual meeting took place 2–3 June 2020
Global Environmental Facility Council (59th meeting)		Virtual meeting took place 7–11 December 2020
Forests		
UNFF 15	4–8 May 2020	Virtual discussions addressed reduced agenda, decision adopted through silence procedure on 30 June 2020
International Tropical Timber Council (56th meeting)	9–14 November 2020	Virtual meeting took place 9–13 November 2020
Ozone		
42nd Meeting of the Open-ended Working Group of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (OEWG 42)	13–17 July 2020	Virtual discussions addressed reduced agenda 14–16 July 2020
Conference of the Parties to the Vienna Convention (COP 12) and Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol (MOP 32)	23–27 November 2020	Virtual meeting with modified agenda for MOP 32 Part 1 took place 23–27 November 2020
Sustainable Development		
High-level meeting of the General Assembly to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the UN	21 September 2020	Virtual meeting took place 21 September 2020
SDG Moment	18 September 2020	Virtual meeting took place 18 September 2020
Fifth UN Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs	12–13 May 2020; Rescheduled date TBD	
High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development	7–16 July 2020	Virtual meeting took place 7–16 July 2020
3rd UN World Data Forum	18–21 October 2020; Rescheduled to 3–6 October 2021	Virtual event with modified agenda took place 19–21 October 2020

*Revised dates as of 1 February 2021

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The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Environment

COVID-19 has changed our lives, but has it changed the global environment? How has it affected the implementation of environmental agreements? The answers to these questions will continue to reveal themselves as the waves of the crisis unfold.

For many developed countries, which have so far been sheltered from the worst of environmental degradation, COVID may teach the hard lesson that this crisis is the very real consequence of unmitigated climate change, deforestation, and the destruction of nature.

Did COVID Reduce our Environmental Impact?

Our lives became smaller. We travelled less. Waves of lockdowns meant we rarely left the house. Surely, this would reduce our impact on the environment, we hoped.

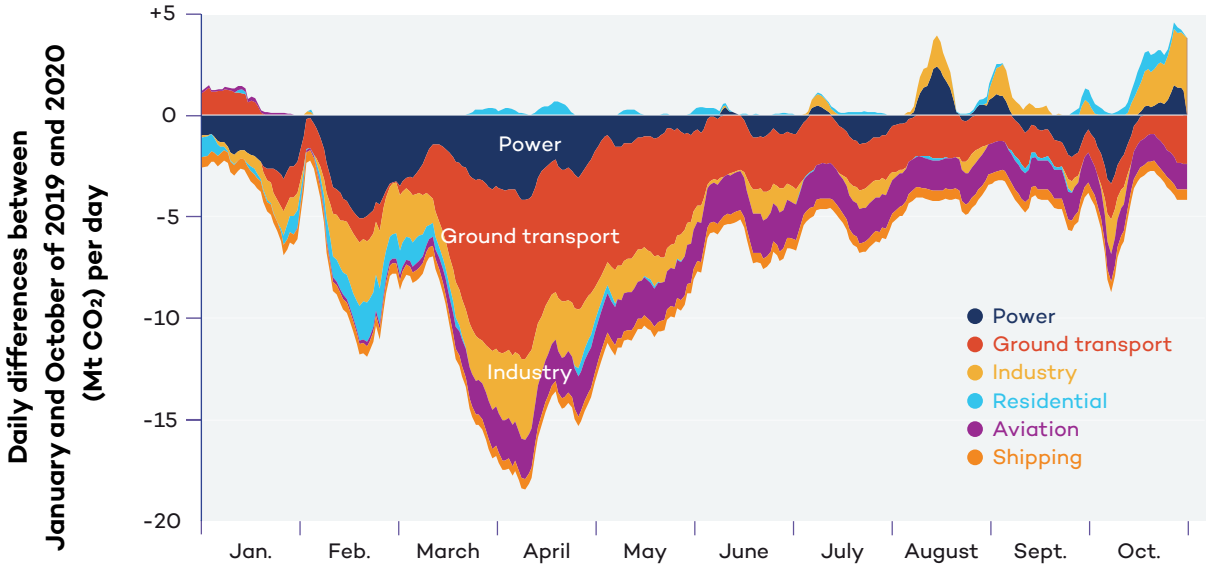
Unfortunately, scientists agree this is hardly the case. If COVID has led to some reductions in our collective impact, these are, at best, a "blip" in the system—and at worst, a surge in what we should avoid.

The emissions blip. Lockdowns did reduce emissions: at the height of the pandemic, daily global emissions fell by 17% relative to 2019. Depending on the strength and timescale of confinement measures against the pandemic, total CO_2 emissions could fall approximately 5% in 2020. But the consensus is that these changes are temporary. The dip also shows that most emissions—as much as 83%—are structural, linked to transportation and energy systems. We won't reduce emissions without transformative change. Moreover, as vaccines draw closer, it is possible a serious "bounce-back" effect might erase any emission reductions.

The conservation blip. Consequences of early lockdowns seemed hopeful for illegal wildlife trafficking. South African rhinoceros poaching halved in six months from March 2020. With restrictions easing, however, organizations have seen a rise in poaching. The twin drivers of lost tourism income and a serious economic downturn could erode conservation incentives and reduce household incomes, leading to a rise in poaching and other activities that will negatively affect biodiversity.

The plastics surge. Before the pandemic, the demand for recycled plastic was higher than the demand for virgin plastic for the very first time. This trend has now reversed. We're using plastics more during the

Figure 2. The Impact of COVID-19 on Greenhouse Gas Emissions



Source: UN Environment Programme (UNEP), Emissions Gap Report, 2020 (reproduced with permission).

pandemic, for personal protective equipment and for disposable containers. As long as we need protection and eating in restaurants is restricted, plastic use will continue to rise. The UN is nearing a decision on how to govern marine plastics, which could potentially include a new treaty. This challenge is now more daunting than anyone expected just a year ago.

What has Changed?

The pandemic foregrounds new ways to think about environmental change and policy. Or perhaps simply the same old ideas reimagined for our current health, climate, and biodiversity crisis times.

The US political debate

In his campaign for presidency of the United States, Joe Biden ran on one of the strongest climate platforms in the history of his country. The US officially left the Paris Agreement in November. It now in the process of rejoining. For climate envoy, Biden appointed John Kerry, who played a pivotal role in the final push to secure the Paris Agreement. For all the optimism, some have questioned whether the US will truly drive ambition, or stick to its old "will they or won't they" patterns. Regardless of the outcome, a long-time powerful player is back in the game.

Inequality and Environmental Justice

Activists have long linked the environmental crises with racial and social inequality. Marginalized populations—women, youth, racialized, and Indigenous Peoples—have been hit hardest by the pandemic, adding to the damning, disproportionate burden these peoples face on the front lines of climate change and biodiversity loss. The impacts of environmental degradation on health outcomes and biodiversity loss especially are most significant among vulnerable populations, particularly those who rely on natural resources for survival and who live without strong social protection mechanisms.

Achieving SDG 2 (zero hunger) now looks less likely. The lockdowns continue to disrupt global food chains and intensify the inadequacies of the global food system. The FAO estimates another 83 million people, and possibly as many as 132 million, may go hungry because of the economic recession triggered by COVID-19. 100 million people could be pushed into extreme poverty.

COVID precipitated political crises from the Caucasus to Central Asia. Additional crises are sure to undermine these countries' ability to address health and environmental crises. Multilateralism could help. The World Social Report 2020 points to "historically high levels of inequality," and calls for "concerted, coordinated and multilateral action" to tackle major challenges affecting inequality within and among countries.

COVID and the Environment: Not a preview, but the main event

Even as the world dealt with lockdowns and overwhelmed healthcare systems throughout 2020, extreme weather dealt blow after blow. In the flurry of awful news, it can seem unthinkable to recite the effects. A quarter of Bangladesh was underwater in June and July. The Atlantic hurricane season exhausted the English alphabet. Weather officials had to use Greek letters as coastal states were battered by storm after storm. Throughout the year, different regions, particularly Australia and the Arctic, saw their worst fire seasons in decades. The deaths numbered in the thousands, damages in the billions. Any one of these disasters would capture world attention in a "normal" year.

If it had not been clear before, 2020 is the ultimate case study that climate breakdown, the biodiversity crisis, material pollution, and threats to human health are not far-flung futures, nor are they separate problems. They are the world as it is, and as it will be: crisis barreling into crisis, each interconnected in their cause—and in their solutions. How will organizations change to accommodate the reality that has been denied for so long?

Forecasting 2021 and Beyond

We know 2021 could be a busy year. So much of 2020's work was postponed. If countries can meet, delegates will be trying to catch up for a year largely lost. But will it be more of the same, or will the impact of the COVID-19 crisis change the game?

Advocates for a "green recovery" to COVID have argued the systemic solutions to restarting the economy are the same as addressing social and environmental crises. Centering and valorizing a care economy, recognizing the role of women; uprooting the economic and social instruments of white supremacy; and upholding Indigenous Peoples' roles in ecosystem protection, among others, they argue, will be key to both rebuilding the world economy and preventing future crises. We don't just need a green recovery. We need a green and inclusive recovery.

Yet it's not clear how or where cooperation on a global green recovery could find its way onto a multilateral agenda. Leaders and diplomats uttered the phrase in various events, from the High-level Roundtable on Climate Action to the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). But the issue doesn't have a home on the UNFCCC agenda. Some suggested the SDGs are the framework for recovery, but this agenda was designed to be implemented voluntarily and is not tied to a global decision-making body. Global coordination could help funnel resources to green projects and create jobs. It could avoid any trade disruptions and stimulate economic growth. So far, there seems little enthusiasm to build an alliance of those making their recoveries green and inclusive. Efforts seem domestic and perhaps *ad hoc* at present.

The need to understand the linkages between biodiversity, ecosystem services, and human health—not to mention the co-benefits of policies that integrate all three—was already on the CBD agenda. In December 2020, a special virtual session of the CBD Subsidiary Bodies focused on biodiversity, One Health and COVID-19. As scientists become more vocal on the role of biodiversity in building resilience, and protecting against the emergence and transmission of infectious diseases, an IPBES workshop highlighted that the same human activities that drive climate change and biodiversity loss also drive pandemic risk: changes in land use, expansion and intensification of agriculture, and unsustainable production, consumption, and trade.

This renews the emphasis on the root causes of environmental degradation and pandemics alike—and the need to shift toward preventing rather than trying to respond to catastrophes. The updated zero

draft of the post-2020 global biodiversity framework recognizes the need for urgent, transformative policy action. Focusing on root causes and providing sufficient finance and support could stabilize biodiversity in the next 10 years and even lead to its recovery by 2050. Beyond traditional conservation tools, such as protected areas, the framework draft features new mechanisms to ensure sustainable production and consumption, and mainstream biodiversity into sectors such as agriculture and fisheries.

Phasing out harmful subsidies—money going toward activities that degrade nature—would be a good start. This can only be achieved through coordinated approaches across ministries at the national level and across forums at the international. The environmental community has its eyes on the World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations on fisheries subsidies, which sought to secure a 2020 agreement on disciplines eliminating subsidies for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and prohibiting subsidies that contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, in line with SDG 14.6. The deadline was missed, but talks advanced further than ever before and will continue in 2021.

The need to address zoonotic disease risks in wildlife trade is expected to influence the CITES agenda. Currently, zoonotic diseases are seen as outside its mandate, but there have been calls for CITES and its parties to address the impact of COVID-19. Parties could amend the Convention to add a new appendix on species that could pose a threat to public or animal health. Or countries could enhance existing partnerships or establish new ones on health and wildlife trade. While other voices point to the need for a new treaty on wildlife crime, for example by developing a fourth Protocol on wildlife crime under the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime or the health aspects of wildlife trade, countries are likely to explore CITES' potential in the meantime.

2021 will require unprecedented global cooperation. International solidarity is needed more than ever. But, responses to the pandemic have had a distinctly nationalist flavour, while emergency measures in the name of public health have given rise to serious human rights concerns. World leaders met virtually in December at the Special Session of the UN General Assembly in response to the pandemic. The World Health Organization pointed to significant funding gaps regarding its access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator. While those in the Global North look to a more normal 2021 with vaccines, lower-income countries lack access, putting decades of economic progress at risk.

Uneven global distribution of vaccines also undermines multilateral action on the environment. Deliberations and decisions require all countries' involvement. Climate and biodiversity action is more ambitious when the most affected—often developing

countries—are in the room. Decisions require consensus. Global cooperation on vaccines affects all areas of multilateralism.

As we see it, the next year will guide both our societies and our environment into one of two futures. Either countries and the world will realize that society and environment are one, and rise from the ashes of a pandemic with eyes toward a sustainable future; or they will ignore the lessons of their collective experience, and follow a steepening path from crisis to crisis.

2021 is going to be an interesting year.