Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

MULTILATERALISM SERIES – POLICY BRIEF 2/2026

Institutional Resilience & Pragmatic Cooperation in the Rio Conventions

Executive Summary

- The Rio Conventions are resilient — but resilience is not rigidity. With multilateral cooperation down by more than 20% since 2019, the system must prove that it can deliver.
- Issue-based coalitions are complementary to the conventions, not substitutes. To ensure that, they need to feed back the outcomes into the main COP processes.
- Institutional resilience hinges on moving from discussing synergies to implementing them.
- Stronger alignment across conventions and secretariats is needed, from joint financial programming and aligned national focal points to platforms that coordinate across action agendas.

The Centre for Multilateral Negotiations (CEMUNE) will convene discussions on this theme throughout the year and invites interest from event and content partners.

Introduction

Multilateral cooperation has fallen by more than 20% since 2019 (World Economic Forum, 2026). Key challenges are a widening trust deficit between North and South, the absence of major parties from parts of the climate process, and a run of stalled negotiations. All point in the same direction: the implementation gap remains, and the multilateral system can no longer translate what it agrees on into what it delivers. Nowhere is this clearer than across the three Rio Conventions. Whether negotiators discuss climate change, biological diversity, or desertification and land degradation, public ambition often outpaces what these processes have achieved.

Against this backdrop, the question arises: **Are the Rio Conventions resilient enough to withstand current multilateral strains, or should we seek alternative avenues to address the most urgent and defining crises of our time? Perhaps most importantly, can the Conventions remain universal, effective and legitimate in these times of flux?**

This policy brief is organised around three themes: the anatomy of the implementation gap between negotiated commitments and on-the-ground delivery; the case for coherence across the Conventions and how these interact with the expanding cast of coalitions and non-state actors shaping implementation; and what conditions are needed for the next phase of cooperation. Insights are based on an intimate discussion forum organised during the 64th meeting of the subsidiary bodies of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Bonn in June 2026, as well as key conversations with other stakeholders.

The Triple Planetary Crisis: One System, Three Regimes

The challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and land degradation are inseparable: they share common socioeconomic drivers, including land-use change, increased fossil fuel demand, and population and economic growth. The urgency of the Conventions' shared mission cannot be overstated. Policies targeting one challenge produce positive and negative spillovers for the others. The OECD's Environmental Outlook (2025) states

that these three crises are set to worsen and reinforce each other, including through species decline and habitat loss.

The Rio Conventions were born of the 1992 Earth Summit as a response to a shared planetary crisis. The three conventions address one system in nature, yet they are governed by three separate institutions, on three separate calendars, with three separate financial pipelines. The separation was not designed so much as inherited. Each convention emerged from its own negotiating track, propelled by its own coalition and its own science. Climate change had been driven onto the agenda by the IPCC's First Assessment Report and by the anxieties of industrialised and small-island developing states (SIDS) (Alliance of Small Island States, 2026; Betzold, 2010; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 1990; United Nations General Assembly, 1990). Biodiversity was carried by the megadiverse countries of the Global South, preoccupied with sovereignty over genetic resources — a principle ultimately enshrined in the Convention itself (Faizi, 2004; United Nations, 1992). Desertification was the cause of the African Group, secured as the price of a balanced Rio package and negotiated only after the Summit itself had closed (United Nations, 1992; United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, 2026, 2019). Three issues, three constituencies, three intergovernmental committees — and, almost inevitably, three treaties.

The UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (COP) meets annually and attracts extensive political attention, while the COPs of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) meet only every two years and typically garner less public and political attention. The drivers and impacts of the triple planetary crisis are highly interlinked, but research and policy responses have been fragmented, leaving important gaps in the understanding of systemic linkages and impacts on both ecosystems and people. However, the overlaps are extensive, and synergies among them offer a way to mutually reinforce action and counter the fragmentation that current siloed working produces. The triple COP year can ensure synergies and systematic linkage, from the UNCCD COP in August to the UNFCCC COP in November.



Photo by Venti Views on Unsplash

Anatomy of the Delivery Gap

Universal frameworks derive their legitimacy from the participation of all parties, who all agree on the same outcome, but at the end of the day, this universality and drive for consensus can make them slow: consensus is hard-won and incremental, building on past decisions even as public expectations rise. The result is a process widely seen by civil society and the general public as "running behind" the pace needed, with consensus decisions, more often than not, resulting in lowest-common-denominator outcomes. This is underlined by the lack of progress on the mitigation work programme in the UNFCCC process. Even the 'rainforest COP', i.e., COP30 in Belém, could not produce a final text that mentioned a fossil fuel roadmap or deliver clear progress on halting deforestation.

There have been steps to fill this gap, however. The Belém Joint Statement on the Rio Conventions — adopted by the Presidencies of UNFCCC COP30, CBD COP16, CBD COP17, UNCCD COP16 and UNCCD COP17 — sought to fill it by committing to promote dialogue, collaboration and coordination of efforts among the three conventions, and

encouraging the development of a workplan of collaboration among incoming Presidencies in early 2026 (UNFCCC COP30 Presidency et al., 2025). Whether that commitment translates into institutional practice is precisely what needs to be considered.

Alongside the Belém Joint Statement, the COP30 Action Agenda also adopted the "Plan to Accelerate Solutions: Synergistic implementation across the Rio Conventions" (PAS). As the Rio Conventions share interrelated goals, the PAS fosters an integrated approach to align strategies and reporting and to maximise impact. It identifies gaps for synergistic implementation, including a fragmented financial landscape, data gaps, and incoherent reporting. The PAS aims to "support enabling conditions within whole-of-government policy environment at global and national levels", accelerate financing, and mobilise cross-sector collaboration (UN Framework Convention on Climate Change COP31 Presidency, 2025).

The PAS does not float free of institutional moorings. It is hosted by the Synergies Collaboration Platform (SCP), an international multi-stakeholder platform established in 2024 to advance the COP28 Joint Statement on Climate, Nature and People, which was reaffirmed at COP30 as the host initiative for both the PAS and the Belém Joint Statement (Synergies Collaboration Platform, 2026). The SCP is broad in reach: it convenes countries, coalitions, financiers and civil society as a global coordination and knowledge hub, and organises its work around four functions that map directly onto the fault lines identified above — aligning national plans across the conventions, mobilising and aligning finance, improving data interoperability and the harmonisation of criteria and definitions across taxonomies, and communicating a coherent narrative on integrated action (Synergies Collaboration Platform, 2026). Its value proposition is precisely that it sits at the level of implementation rather than negotiation, offering a venue in which the action agendas of the three conventions can be woven together rather than pursued in parallel. Whether it can convert convening power into demonstrable delivery — and avoid becoming one more platform among the many now competing for attention — is the test it now faces.

However, implementation to foster collaboration and synergies is not solely the responsibility of secretariats and presidencies. More parties must be brought into this discussion, not fewer, and greater engagement from the Global South, particularly SIDS, is needed for the conversation to be genuinely fruitful. Narrower processes may move faster, but they could forfeit the representativeness on which the system's authority rests — and weaken the quality of the outcomes (Roesch & Harris, 2025). But the more vocal the highly ambitious countries get, the louder the pushback might be.



The trade-off between inclusivity and speed, therefore, sits at the heart of the gap. The absence of a major party at the COPs cannot be underestimated when looking at what could drag ambition down, but sustained engagement from non-state actors and others continues to reinforce the multilateral system. The system may be under pressure, but it is not without resilience.

The Case for Coherence

Treating the three crises separately weakens each of them — politically, financially and scientifically. Politically, siloed approaches compete for the same scarce ministerial attention. Financially, they draw on a fragmented architecture that no single convention controls, and the inadequacy, fragmentation, and misalignment of existing financial flows continue to hinder effective implementation of the three Conventions. Coherence is ultimately won or lost at the national level, where a lack of coordination among the focal points of the three conventions remains a persistent structural challenge —

as empirically documented by countries that have piloted harmonised national reporting (Bouhari & Fazel, 2010; Global Environment Facility, 2026).

Cooperation outside the Rio Conventions is not hypothetical. It is now the operating reality. Non-state actors and financial institutions sustain momentum when governments waver, demonstrate scalable projects that make synergies tangible, and supply the finance without which none of it moves.

A REINVIGORATED JOINT LIAISON GROUP

The Joint Liaison Group (JLG) is another avenue for pursuing synergies and pragmatic cooperation. It was established in August 2001 by the Secretariats of the Rio Conventions and is the primary institutional mechanism for coordination. Its mandates include sharing information and raising awareness, providing information on interlinkages, developing technical papers, and encouraging better coordination among national focal points and stakeholder groups (Joint Liaison Group of the Rio Conventions, 2026). These are real but limited ambitions, and progress at the Secretariat level has not consistently translated into national implementation.

The 2025 period saw some important momentum. The JLG held a productive meeting in Bonn on 2 September 2025, at which the Executive Secretaries charted next-stage collaboration, including priority actions for 2025–2026. Both the CBD and the UNCCD reached consensus at their most recent COPs in 2024 and adopted decisions to reinvigorate cross-convention cooperation. However, the UNFCCC COP has yet to match this momentum with substantive decisions. This asymmetry between the conventions is a structural weakness that could undermine the JLG overall.

A strengthened JLG with a clearer, implementation-oriented mandate can, though, close this gap. Practical reforms and technical coordination should advance in parallel with mandate negotiations rather than waiting for formal authority to catch up.

THE FINANCE CONSTRAINT

Finance is the central constraint to achieving the goals of all Rio Conventions, and the numbers lay bare its scale. The Global Biodiversity Framework estimates a biodiversity finance gap of USD 700 billion per year between now and 2030. Combating desertification will require USD 355 billion in annual investment over 2025–2030, against a funding mobilisation gap of approximately USD 278 billion (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022; United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, 2024). For Nature-based Solutions overall, UNEP's State of Finance for Nature 2026 report reveals that global financing totals only USD 220 billion, compared with USD 7.3 trillion in nature-negative finance flows annually — a staggering 30:1 imbalance (United Nations Environment Programme, 2026). For every dollar invested in protecting ecosystems, approximately $30 is directed toward activities that actively destroy them.

These aggregate financing gaps are compounded by fragmentation. CBD, UNCCD and UNFCCC each draw on separate financial pipelines, e.g. the Global Environment Facility, the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund, the Global Biodiversity Framework Fund, each with different replenishment cycles, application procedures, and reporting requirements. The path forward identified by the Conventions' own parties points to joint financial programming frameworks that synchronise funding criteria, reporting cycles, and co-benefit prioritisation across the three Conventions:

- the broader adoption of biodiversity expenditure reviews and climate budget tagging as integrated planning instruments (United Nations Environment Programme, 2025)
- reforms to phase out environmentally harmful subsidies (estimated at USD 2.4 trillion annually in public funding) (United Nations Environment Programme, 2026), and
- binding timelines and accountability frameworks for subsidy reform aligned with Target 18 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

These are demanding requirements, but they are already articulated in the formal processes — what is missing is the political will and institutional architecture to act on them. COP30's most tangible financial achievement — the Baku to Belém Roadmap mobilising at least USD 1.3 trillion in climate finance annually by 2035 — represents an agreement on a number, not a mechanism. The lack of progress in setting up the agreed work programme on climate finance at SB64 risks pushing difficult political fights into COP31. One thought bears repeating, however: the delivery gap will persist as long as finance is not embedded in the implementation and synergies architecture.

The Next Phase of Cooperation: Three recommendations

There are three conditions for a constructive next phase: an implementation focus, structured coherence, and genuine reinvestment.

1. **Appoint implementation focal points and look for party representatives that can not only negotiate but also implement.**

The decisive shift is from discussing synergies to implementing them. That means appointing implementation focal points and asking honestly whether the right people are in place to implement and coordinate national policy — not only to negotiate it. The growth of the action agenda should build on what has already been achieved rather than generate fresh initiatives for their own sake. The COP31 Presidency has already used SB64 to unveil fresh targets for electrification, urban resilience, efficiency, and waste as part of its broader Action Agenda — a signal that the Rio Conventions can evolve toward operational relevance.

2. **Strengthening the JLG with a clearer, implementation-oriented mandate and making better use of science and systems thinking.**

Institutionalised dialogue across the conventions can deliver impact that no single regime achieves alone. In practice, this means: (1) a strengthened JLG with a clearer, implementation-oriented mandate, (2) aligned national focal points, (3) better use of science and systems thinking, and (4) reporting and monitoring systems no longer held back by uneven technical capacity. A key near-term step — already under active development — is the CBD-SBSTTA roadmap, which identifies concrete actions on headline options for policy coherence across the Rio Conventions. Progress at the Presidency level is already visible. The Belém Joint Statement, adopted at COP30 in November 2025 by all five incoming Presidencies of the Rio Conventions, set out joint commitments to promote dialogue, identify areas of alignment, encourage interoperability of reporting platforms, and collaborate on high-level events — including through the triple COP year of 2026. These political commitments now need institutional underpinning.

3. **Create political buy-in, in particular from finance ministers.**

Political will has to be manufactured, not assumed. That requires a marketable 'basket' of synergies and co-benefits capable of convincing political leaders, finance ministers who are present and engaged, and structures able to serve all three conventions simultaneously. Above all, it requires confronting the fragmented financial architecture directly. Recommendations identified within the convention processes, including an Integrated Programme within future GEF replenishments dedicated to synergistic action, simplified reporting for multi-focal projects, green budgeting tools, and subnational finance mechanisms, are already on the table. What is required is the political decision to act on them.

Conclusion

The case for pragmatic cooperation as a route to institutional resilience is a strong one. The Rio Conventions can be strengthened, synergies operationalised, and coalitions harnessed, providing the work remains governed, financed and grounded. The system is resilient, and the appetite to make it deliver is real.

The institutional landscape of mid-2026 is notably more active than it was a year ago. A new joint website has been launched; the Belém Joint Statement has been adopted by all five incoming convention Presidencies; and the CBD and UNCCD have adopted decisions to reinvigorate cooperation. The Santa Marta conference has demonstrated what a properly governed coalition of the doers can produce, and SB64 has advanced work on the Just Transition mechanism even as it stalled on finance. These are not trivial achievements.

But a gap remains between the negotiation processes and outcomes and what happens on the ground. The 30:1 ratio of nature-destroying to nature-protecting finance flows, the USD 700 billion biodiversity finance gap, and the

persistent absence of substantive UNFCCC decisions on convention coherence all point to the same conclusion: resilience proven in the negotiating room is not yet resilience delivered in a degraded landscape or a vulnerable community. That distance, between commitment and delivery, between the table and the territory, is the question CEMUNE's policy brief series on "rewiring multilateralism" turns to next.



Image by wirestock on Magnific

References

Alliance of Small Island States. (2026). AOSIS: A history of leadership at the UNFCCC. Retrieved June 24, 2026, from https://www.aosis.org/aosis-a-history-of-leadership-at-the-unfccc/

Betzold, C. (2010). 'Borrowing' Power to Influence International Negotiations: AOSIS in the Climate Change Regime, 1990–1997. Politics, 30(3), 131–148. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2010.01377.x

Bouhari, A., & Fazel, A. M. (2010). Piloting integrated processes and approaches to facilitate national reporting to Rio Conventions (FNR_Rio): A Global Environment Facility financed project. MEA Bulletin, (89). https://enb.iisd.org/email/mea-l/guestarticle89b.html

Convention on Biological Diversity. (2022). Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Decision 15/4, CBD/COP/DEC/15/4). Convention on Biological Diversity

Faizi, S. (2004). The unmaking of a treaty. Radical Philosophy, (126). https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/news/the-unmaking-of-a-treaty

Global Environment Facility. (2026). Piloting integrated processes and approaches to facilitate national reporting to Rio Conventions. Retrieved June 24, 2026, from https://thegef.org/project/piloting-integrated-processes-and-approaches-facilitate-national-reporting-rio-conventions

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (1990). Climate change: The IPCC scientific assessment.

Joint Liaison Group of the Rio Conventions. (2026). Joint Liaison Group of the Rio Conventions. Retrieved June 24, 2026, from Joint Liaison Group of the Rio Conventions

Organisation for Economic Development. (2025). Environmental Outlook on the Triple Planetary Crisis. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/257ffbb6-en

Roesch, J. L., & Harris, J. (2025, October 24). Reimagining Climate Diplomacy: How the Lines of Power and Multilateralism Are Being Redrawn. Reimagining Climate Diplomacy: How the Lines of Power and Multilateralism Are Being Redrawn. https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/10/reimagining-climate-diplomacy-how-the-lines-of-power-and-multilateralism-are-being-redrawn/

UNFCCC COP30 Presidency, CBD COP16 Presidency, CBD COP17 Presidency, UNCCD COP16 Presidency, & UNCCD COP17 Presidency. (2025). Belém Joint Statement on the Rio Conventions. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/68fb8f521547cfe50ee2af9b/691e56a3f444cc76fbd4cb90_368081e1adb18867d542fc732fc2258d_Belem%20Joint%20Statement%20on%20the%20Rio%20Conventions%20%28final%20%E2%80%93%202025.11.18%29.pdf

United Nations. (1992). Establishment of an intergovernmental negotiating committee for the elaboration of an international convention to combat desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa.

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. (2026). The history of UNCCD. Retrieved June 24, 2026, from https://www.unccd.int/convention/history-unccd
United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. (2019, June 16). 25 years of growing together: A convention is born after more than two decades. https://www.unccd.int/news-stories/blogs/25-years-growing-together-convention-born-after-more-two-decades

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. (2024). Investing in land's future: Financial needs assessment for UNCCD. https://www.unccd.int/sites/default/files/2024-12/58587%20UNCCD_FNA_SDM_web.pdf

United Nations Environment Programme. (2025). From silos to synergies. https://www.unep.org/resources/report/silos-synergies

United Nations Environment Programme. (2026). State of Finance for Nature 2026: Nature in the Red - Powering the Trillion Dollar Nature Transition Economy. https://wedocs.unep.org/handle/20.500.11822/49119

United Nations General Assembly. (1990). Protection of global climate for present and future generations of mankind.

World Economic Forum. (2026). The Global Cooperation Barometer 2026.

About

Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

CEMUNE – the Centre for Multilateral Negotiations, a non-profit organisation, is dedicated to strengthening international negotiations for better outcomes on climate, biodiversity, and sustainability. Our goal is to achieve more effective outcomes at global UN sustainability summits by strengthening the negotiation capacities of all participants – fostering international cooperation for our planet. Over the past decade, we have contributed to the adoption of the Paris Agreement and supported over ten UN conferences with strategic process facilitation, providing tailor-made negotiation solutions for specific country and stakeholder needs. CEMUNE is the bridge between these international processes and those responsible for carrying out the work on the ground (Businesses, COP Presidencies, Governments, Civil Society) and serves as a neutral and trusted facilitator.

We stand for a sustainable and just future and support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through our commitment to multilateral negotiations, we promote climate action (SDG 13), the preservation of biodiversity, and the fight against desertification (SDGs 14 and 15). We strengthen peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) and advocate for global partnerships that enable the achievement of all goals set out in the 2030 Agenda (SDG 17).

AUTHORS
Kate Helfenstein and Frauke Pipart

CEMUNE
The Centre for Multilateral Negotiations gGmbH
Hans-Henny-Jahnn-Weg 23
22085 Hamburg, Germany

THE MULTILATERALISM PROJECT
This policy brief is the second publication in CEMUNE's "Rewiring Multilateralism" Project, which aims to strengthen understanding of multilateralism in today's shifting geopolitical landscape. It outlines how to make it more inclusive, agile, and effective. It will deepen insight into changing power dynamics and inequalities, and their impact on future global cooperation. It will provide actionable recommendations for reform. Through research and dialogue, the project will help reimagine multilateralism as a more adaptive and results-oriented system, capable of addressing 21st-century challenges.

Follow us on **LinkedIn**

Copyright © CEMUNE, July 2026