Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

MULTILATERALISM SERIES - POLICY BRIEF 3/2026

A stress test for multilateralism: More courage to solve the SDG implementation gap

Executive Summary

- The implementation of the SDGs is far behind because multilateralism is not aligned with the political and institutional realities required to deliver them.
- Success stories are underreported. When the system is under stress, it is crucial to point out its intrinsic power and highlight what it has achieved and what it can achieve in the future.
- More courage is needed: Negotiators have to speak up, rethink existing structures, and build trust across divides, even when it is politically uncomfortable, because the alternative is a multilateral system too weak to deliver on the SDGs.
- A fit-for-purpose multilateralism needs three things: finance realigned with political priorities, science with a formal seat in decision-making, and Global South capacity strong enough to make inclusion real.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have become the central organising framework for multilateral cooperation, helping improve the lives of millions. Yet, a decade after their adoption, only 36% of the targets are on track or moderately progressing, with nearly half progressing too slowly and 15% even regressing (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2026). The lack of progress on the SDGs is a symptom of a deeper crisis in the cooperative assumptions under which the SDGs were built.

2015 was a year of great promises, with the adoption of both the SDG framework and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Since then, multilateralism has been tasked with closing the gap between ambition and delivery, but has largely failed to do so (Helfenstein & Pipart, 2026). Multilateralism is faced with multiple structural crises: geopolitical fragmentation, populism, and rising competition among major powers. These crises occur "at a time when the need for sensible rules of international cooperation has greater urgency than ever before" (Jaldi, 2023, p. 5).

Multilateralism and global governance can function under principles of shared sovereignty and shared responsibility. This was evident at the Rio Conference in 1992 and was still true when the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement were negotiated. Yet, today, the discourse is moving sharply in a different direction: nationalism, "my country first" and right-wing populism are the formative principles among major powers. With the retraction of the US leadership role, a gap has emerged in the international system. China is reluctant to invest sufficiently in the international system to take over, and the EU is too fragmented and too weak to fill the gap (Pisani-Ferry, 2019).

Today, multilateralism faces questions of credibility, legitimacy and capability (Singh & Woolcock, 2022, p. 4). Mark Carney, Canadian Prime Minister, captured the challenge in his address at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2026: "We are in the midst of a rupture, not a transition" (Carney, 2026). This has prompted many to question what a renewed, effective multilateralism can look like. Rethinking existing structures can be beneficial to distribute the costs and benefits of global problems more equitably (Singh & Woolcock, 2022).

This policy brief assesses whether today's geopolitics are fundamentally incompatible with the cooperative assumptions behind the SDGs. It examines the delivery gap through three lenses: the erosion of development finance, the persistent marginalisation of Small Island Developing States' (SIDS) voices in multilateral negotiations, and the rise of mini-lateral formats as both a pragmatic response to gridlock and a risk to universal legitimacy. It then proposes ways to make cooperation more effective without sacrificing legitimacy and inclusion. As part of

CEMUNE's broader series on the future of multilateralism, this brief's guiding question is: **What could a 'fit-for-purpose' multilateralism look like beyond 2030 to deliver on the promise of the SDGs?** To answer this question, CEMUNE hosted a panel discussion during the Hamburg Sustainability Week in June 2026, convening leading experts on these topics[1].

Financing the SDGs: A Widening Gap Amid Untold Successes

The SDG delivery gap reflects two distinct kinds of failure: a constitutive one, with questions of legitimacy and representation, and a functional one, rooted in implementation and institutional capacity. Both are visible in how the goals are being financed.

FINANCE DECLINE

The SDGs set out ambitious goals in 2015: no poverty, zero hunger, peace, justice, and strong institutions, to name but a few. Goal 17 on partnerships is meant to underpin all others by strengthening implementation and revitalising the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2026a). To ensure the financial capacity of implementing the SDGs, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, adopted in 2015, described the "blueprint actions by governments, international organizations, businesses and civil society to increase the financial resources available to align financing flows and policies with economic, social, and environmental priorities" (United Nations, 2026b).

Yet, a decade later, development finance is declining massively, making implementation harder to achieve. Official Development Assistance "fell by a record 23.1 per cent in 2025, returning to 2015 levels, with further declines expected" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2026, p. 42). 2026 is projected to be the third consecutive decline, with a fall of around 6.9% (OECD, 2026). A large part of this drop is due to the reduced funding coming from the United States (OECD, 2026). This drop has massive consequences. In the case of UNICEF, Verena Knaus explained that agencies now face not just doing more with less but choosing carefully what to stop doing altogether. The problem is that withdrawing from some cases can mean moving the tipping point, causing countries to accelerate into a downward spiral.



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With the SDGs being far from met, this development makes delivery even harder. And extreme poverty, food insecurity, lack of access to drinking water or everyday discrimination all remain embedded in the overarching planetary crisis. Finance alone was never going to solve this, but under current circumstances, there is even less capacity to address it at all.

TECTONIC SHIFTS

The financial difficulties sit within a deeper structural shift. According to Dirk Messner, President of the German Environment Agency, multilateral cooperation is confronted with four tectonic shifts:

1 The event, organised by CEMUNE, was titled "Rethinking Cooperation in a Multipolar World: How can a new Multilateralism deliver for the SDGs?". We thank Eversheds Sutherland for hosting the discussion at their Hamburg office and express our gratitude to all speakers.

"1) The planetary crisis, 2) the radical questioning of the international order, 3) a democracy crisis in many stable democracies, and 4) innovation in AI and other technologies." (Dirk Messner, 29.06.2026, Hamburg Sustainability Week).

These shifts are deeply interconnected and cannot be solved in isolation. A functional international system, stable democracies and the effective use of AI and other technologies are preconditions for addressing current planetary crises.

SUCCESS STORIES

Making negative headlines and analysis in these times of crisis is important. Yet, there is a case for spending more time talking about the successes. The 2026 SDG report shows that "maternal and child mortality continue to fall, […] Access to safe drinking water, sanitation and electricity has expanded at scale" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2026, p. 2). The United Nations' longer record reinforces the point: it "saved millions of lives through leading the world to eradicate smallpox, containing the 2014–2015 Ebola epidemic, and increasing vaccinations" (Barrett et al., 2026, p. 5). This imbalance in attention between multilateralism in crisis and real success stories is part of the problem. How can a system be perceived as necessary, legitimate, and effective when audiences only hear about its shortcomings? To remain functional, multilateral cooperation and institutions must restore trust, making it crucial to highlight successes and improvements.



Graphic by (https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment)

The View from SIDS: Financing Gaps and Local Implementation

The SDGs are of crucial importance for the most vulnerable countries. For them, a single storm event can disrupt their entire GDP. Often, their views and experiences are not sufficiently included in the multilateral process. Clayticia Daniel, representing St. Kitts and Nevis, argued that within negotiations such as the UNFCCC COP or Subsidiary Body meetings, SIDS have to fight for their seat at the table before being able to actually fight for the issues at the core of the negotiations. This is time-intensive, frustrating and exhausting.

The SDGs assume that countries come together in good faith to negotiate towards shared goals. But the current geopolitical landscape has changed, making it incompatible with this assumption. "My country first" has led developed countries to redirect their resources inwards, leaving SIDS and other Global South countries out. Mini-lateral formats could make these situations worse if they do not ensure participation criteria and funding for these states to attend as well. Speed is desperately needed, but it cannot come at the expense of legitimacy and inclusion.

"The current geopolitical dynamics are incompatible with the cooperative assumptions of the SDGs, but the response cannot be to lower the ambition of the SDGs" (Clayticia Daniel, 29.06.2026, Hamburg Sustainability Week).

Given the low greenhouse gas emissions of SIDS, they have considerably lower bargaining power compared to the major emitters (Petri & Karlas, 2026). On top of that, the small states simply cannot follow all negotiations in detail, as their party delegation only consists of a few members, compared to some parties attending "with around 2000 delegates" (Petri & Karlas, 2026, p. 3). Yet, vulnerable developing states, especially in Africa, possess "many of the assets required for the global energy transition: abundant renewable energy resources, globally significant reserves of critical minerals and the fastest-growing labor

force in the world" (Lopes, 2026). Hence, they are a crucial part of addressing the planetary crisis.

The Mini-lateral Dilemma

Coalitions of the willing and regional initiatives can unlock implementation precisely where universal consensus stalls. Cooperation among smaller groups of countries has persisted even as global multilateral cooperation has seemingly declined, with economies continuing to find value in working through pragmatic, agile, interest-based partnerships.

ADVANTAGES

Such coalitions can quickly bring together committed countries, showcase scalable projects, and demonstrate synergies in practice (Eckersley, 2012). They are "ad hoc, flexible, and voluntary, and follow a bottom-up approach" (Jaldi, 2023, p. 13). To function properly and ensure maximum effectiveness, these mini-lateral formats "should rely on a limited set of universal principles and be served by nimble and legitimate institutions" (Pisani-Ferry, 2019, p. 1). Involving a limited number of actors, these formats can better solve collective-action problems and avoid free-riding. This is particularly relevant when the consequences of free-riding are less rapidly visible, as is the case with climate change or biodiversity loss.

RISKS

Using mini-laterals is not without consequence, though. Bypassing conventions carries actual costs. A proliferation of parallel and bilateral initiatives risks duplicating effort, fragmenting standards, and allowing reluctant states to free ride on others' ambition (Falkner, 2016; Jaldi, 2023). There is a potential for outright conflict between tracks rather than mutual reinforcement. Exclusive mini-lateralism could be seen as elitist, procedurally unjust, and likely self-serving; thus, a more principled formulation may be needed (Eckersley, 2012).

SOLUTIONS

Mini-lateralism is best viewed as complementary rather than competitive — but complementarity is not automatic. It requires deliberate, structured dialogue between coalitions and conventions. The First International Conference on Transitioning Away from Fossil Fuels (Santa Marta, Colombia, April 2026) provides a test case. Co-hosted by Colombia and the Netherlands, it brought together 57 countries, aiming to be a solutions-focused setting and explicitly designed to feed its outcomes back into the COP process. Concrete outcomes include a voluntary, informal steering committee to advance discussions on the issue. Ireland and Tuvalu were announced as co-hosts of the Second Conference in 2027 (Earth Negotiations Bulletin, 2026). Yet, it remains to be seen whether the outcome can lead to any real progress at COP31, thereby proving a best-practice case for mini-laterals in promoting synergies and cooperation.

Beyond 2030: What Would a "Fit-for-Purpose" Multilateralism Look Like?

Multilateralism needs to transform to address the multitude of dilemmas it currently faces. To deal with the geopolitical challenges, institutions require high-quality leaders who have the courage, capacity and political standing to navigate these political rivalries (Woods, 2023). Without courage, these institutions risk losing relevance to mini-laterals already trying to fill these gaps. Peter Renner, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Foundation Development and Climate Alliance, highlighted the need for all individuals attending global negotiations to acknowledge their responsibility:

> *"The people have a responsibility, an accountability and a living responsibility for the people who made them go to the negotiation table" (Peter Renner, 29.06.2026, Hamburg Sustainability Week).*

Through this policy brief, we identify three conditions that define what a fit-for-purpose multilateralism would need to deliver: mobilise finance, treat scientific and technical expertise as key, and ensure real inclusive participation.

1. Realign political will and political priorities to close the finance gap

The decline in development finance is the biggest obstacle to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and any other multilateral agreements. While it is easy to call for more financial contributions from developed states and private finance institutions, it is unlikely to lead to change. Yet, there are several levers that a fit-for-purpose multilateralism can address. **First**, public and private finance are both important and need to be perceived as being complementary, not substitutes. Importantly, they have different purposes and allow different liberties for those receiving the funds. Financing often comes with strict conditions, and, worse, is frequently structured as an interest-bearing loan (The Club of Rome, 2024). **Second**, political priorities need to shift. In the current geopolitical context, many countries, such as Germany, choose to significantly raise their military expenditures. Germany's draft 2027 budget sees an increase in defence funding and a significant cut of 6% in development aid (Mithika, 2026). While that might make sense in the short term from a security perspective, more financial investments in the SDGs, including the triple planetary crisis, do require long-term thinking and understanding. **Third**, development finance and environmental finance need to be thought of and dealt with together. Treating these together allows us "to mobilize international cooperation in support of productive investment, technological upgrading, industrial competitiveness and economic resilience" (Lopes, 2026, p. 2).

2. Strengthen the formal role of scientific advisory bodies

Multilateral processes should give scientific and technical advisory bodies a more formal role in shaping political outcomes, rather than a purely consultative one. At present, bodies such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) generate strong scientific consensus that does not translate into political action. As Lopes (2026) puts it: "scientific consensus has never been stronger, yet political consensus has rarely been weaker". Technical negotiators with strong scientific backgrounds do not necessarily have the ability to influence the political decision-makers. Political mandates often preclude the transformative change that is needed and called for, treating scientific input simply as providing options and perspectives. To address this reality, particularly in climate negotiations, advisory bodies need a more formal role within the process, following the precedent of the "permanent scientific advisory body" of the CBD COP (The Club of Rome, 2024, p. 3). The IPCC and comparable advisory bodies already offer concrete strategies and innovative solutions for addressing the interlocking crises multilateralism must respond to. A fit-for-purpose multilateralism should embed their advice more directly and seriously into the commitments made in multilateral negotiations.

3. Increase Global South capacities to ensure real inclusivity

Inclusivity does not stop at formal participation; it is achieved in lived daily practices. The ambition of the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and other multilateral frameworks towards inclusivity is clear: every party is treated equally. Yet, in reality, powerful states are getting together on the sidelines and small, vulnerable countries are getting excluded. Negotiators from the SIDS and other Global South delegations too often spend their negotiating capital fighting to be in the room before they can fight for the actual issue at stake.

To address these challenges, multilateral processes need to increase Global South capacities. "Limited expertise and personnel instability" reinforce the inequalities that these countries are facing (Petri & Karlas, 2026, p. 3). While it is unlikely that we will see rapid changes in the number of delegates, those attending from the SIDS and Global South can be strengthened through training on negotiation skills, content and cooperation mechanisms to increase bargaining power.

Implications and Conclusion

While the SDGs will not be achievable by 2030, they remain the "most effective blueprint for peace, prosperity and sustainability" (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2026, p. 3). The focus in the coming years should be, to address the remaining delivery gap. One thing that stood out in our panel discussion in Hamburg was **courage**. Verena Knaus, Head of Government Relations at UNICEF, explained that it is crucial for negotiators and institutions to speak out and defend the system, even when it is uncomfortable. A

multilateral system no one is willing to defend cannot deliver on the SDGs either.

The multilateral system will continue to change, face pressure, and be forced to adjust. Initiatives like the Santa Marta conference can help cope with these disruptions but, importantly, should not replace universal institutions and decisions. If we want to achieve the SDGs and solve the planetary crisis, we need a combination of universal institutions and coalitions of the willing. Universal institutions can provide legitimacy, inclusivity, and power, while smaller coalitions can bring speed and innovation. Both are desperately needed. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres puts it: "21st century challenges require 21st century solutions: frameworks that are networked and inclusive; and that draw on the expertise of all of humanity." (Guterres, 2024).



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About

CEMUNE – the Centre for Multilateral Negotiations, a non-profit organization, 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).

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THE MULTILATERALISM PROJECT
This policy brief is the third 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.

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