

Centre for Multilateral Negotiations

MULTILATERALISM SERIES – POLICY BRIEF 4/2026

From Agreement to Delivery: Reconnecting multilateralism with the real world

Executive Summary

- Multilateralism has entered an implementation phase the system was not built for — a diagnosis the UN Secretary-General's UN80 reform initiative shares.
- The missing layer is connective infrastructure: granular data, domestic legal frameworks, and the relationships that unblock negotiations at higher levels.
- Closing the gap between agreement and delivery requires different machinery, not renegotiation: continuity, transparency, granular data, and structured engagement.
- Every actor holds a lever that needs to be utilised: Presidencies' continuity, Parties' precision, the UN system's transparency, business's credibility, and civil society's depth.

Introduction

Conferences of the Parties (COPs) have become a key feature of multilateral environmental governance. They are the supreme decision-making bodies of multilateral agreements, turning agenda items into agreements that must be implemented. Today, however, multilateralism faces new pressure. COPs are moving from negotiating agreements to addressing how these agreements are implemented at regional, national and local levels. In other words, multilateralism is entering an implementation phase: less negotiation at COP level, more implementation at local level (Watkinson et al., 2026). Yet COPs were designed to negotiate, not to support implementation, and implementation requires funds and resources. This adds to the stress multilateralism already faces, from the United States' withdrawal from the Paris Agreement to the wider UN80 reform debate. Together, these pressures have sharpened questions about whether — and how — multilateralism still works.

A core policy challenge for multilateralism in 2026 is to enhance its effectiveness and speed while safeguarding legitimacy and inclusiveness (Helfenstein & Pipart, 2026a). Against this backdrop, and as part of CEMUNE's broader series on the future of multilateralism, this policy brief picks up where our previous research ended, with the distance "between the table and the territory" (Helfenstein & Pipart, 2026b). It asks why multilateral processes remain disconnected from the economic, social, and political realities we face today, and what it would take to close this gap. In doing so, it contributes to the debate on reforming multilateral processes, particularly the COPs.

To further interrogate these issues, CEMUNE convened a roundtable, "Making Multilateralism Deliver: Connecting Process to Practice", on 25 June 2026 during London Climate Action Week, bringing together perspectives spanning COP negotiations and Presidencies, climate finance, business and industry, commercial law, and Indigenous and civil society advocacy.

This brief builds on that discussion and asks three questions: (1) what factors keep the implementation gap open, (2) what needs to be built so the multilateral process, flawed as it is, can deliver, and (3) who needs to do what, since no single actor can close the gap alone.

The Implementation Gap: Structural Disconnections

The implementation gap continues to widen as negotiators agree text that needs to be implemented at scale. Many multilateral processes are built to produce agreements, not to execute them (Ruchti-Crowley & Watkinson, 2026). As such, they are not implementing bodies but rather bodies that can convene, signal and decide. Delivery on their decisions needs to happen outside their meetings, on the

other roughly 350 days of the year, and it is not something the multilateral system can directly control — it can influence, but it cannot implement. Expecting a negotiating forum to do so misdiagnoses the problem. The right question is not whether the multilateral system can implement, but how well its outputs equip those who do — and on that measure, the process falls short. This is not only an outside critique. The UN's own UN80 reform initiative has reached a comparable conclusion, locating the delivery problem not only in the number of mandates but in how mandates are designed, implemented and reviewed, and in the limited visibility of the mandate landscape itself (United Nations, 2026a).

The main task for negotiators is to reach agreement, which does not specifically include ensuring that agreements are implemented (Watkinson et al., 2026). Additionally, agreements are written for governments, not for the actors responsible for executing them. In reality, the gap has opened up during the negotiations, before agreement is reached, and is shaped by those who reach it: government officials. Those living with drought, floods, food insecurity and climate-driven displacement are largely absent from, or unheard in, the negotiating rooms where responses to these crises are designed and where decisions are drafted at a distance from the realities they are meant to change. Our policy brief on the Sustainable Development Goals found the same for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), whose delegations often have to fight for a seat at the table before they can fight for the actual issue (Pipart & Helfenstein, 2026). The result is visible in negotiated text. Outcomes routinely invoke "the private sector" or "civil society" as if each were a single actor with common incentives. As our experts discussed, in practice, capital sits with heterogeneous institutions, each with distinct mandates, risk appetites and obligations. Language about "mobilising billions" that no actual capital owner can recognise, price or act on is not a mandate; it is a hope. Implementers, including pension funds, commercial banks, corporates, and philanthropies, need to be able to see themselves, in practical terms, in what is agreed.

Moreover, feedback from the ground rarely reaches the negotiation room to shape decisions. The system's formal feedback loops run on multi-year reporting and stocktake cycles, and its monitoring frameworks tend to measure compliance with text rather than change in outcomes. Aggregating data at national and regional levels compounds the problem. Totals can improve while nothing changes for communities facing floods or food insecurity, because aggregate reporting conceals where reductions happen and who benefits. Openness and granularity in the data would shorten the feedback loop and highlight those experiencing negative impacts, increasing their ability to show where action is needed.

Incoherence deepens the credibility problem. Governments make ambitious pledges in plenary while subsidising fossil fuels at home. Companies make net-zero commitments while lobbying against the policies needed to meet them. These contradictions are rarely called out in the rooms where they matter. This has eroded trust across many processes, and the erosion now extends to the science itself: sustained misinformation, political attacks on climate science, and funding pressures threaten the shared factual base on which entire regimes depend.



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Connecting Negotiation to Delivery: Building the Connective Infrastructure

Negotiations, in and of themselves, are not without purpose. At their core is the ability to provide signals, and it is those signals that can demonstrably move markets. The Paris Agreement sent a policy signal that became a market signal,

and renewable energy is now the cheapest new electricity generation in much of the world partly because investors could see where policy was heading (Peake & Ekins, 2017; Simshauser & Gilmore, 2026). Estimates put the world's warming trajectory at about 2.6°C under current policies – around 2.2°C if pledges and net-zero targets are met – versus roughly 3.6°C under the policies in place when the Paris Agreement was adopted (Climate Action Tracker, 2025). The Paris Agreement and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, among others, give governments, companies, and communities a shared horizon to orient against, and the completion of the Article 6 rulebook at COP29 in 2024 sent a comparable signal for carbon markets. But a signal only becomes delivery where the infrastructure exists to receive it — and this connective infrastructure is the regime's missing layer.

Global goals deliver nothing until they are converted into national targets, sectoral transition plans and — critically — pipelines of investable projects. That conversion depends on domestic institutional and legal frameworks that give implementing actors clarity on the rules of the game: who is responsible, how risk is allocated, and on what terms capital can participate. Where such frameworks exist, confidence follows and capital flows; where they do not, even enormous renewable resource potential sits untouched. Multilateral development banks and technical partners already support this institution-building, but their effort remains thin relative to the ambition negotiated. The key is to turn national plans into platforms for implementation rather than reporting exercises (Baker et al., 2025; Kruger et al., 2026).

COPs remain among the very few places where negotiators, scientists, financiers, business leaders, and frontline communities encounter one another directly, and those encounters can change positions. These relationships often do the work that procedure cannot. Negotiations frequently advance through informal exchanges outside the formal room, even as the COP around that core negotiating community has grown many times over (Müller et al., 2024). As a panellist at our event recalled, negotiations have sometimes sat deadlocked for days only for the disputed text to be accepted within hours once a small group representing a cross-section of the negotiators had worked through it outside the formal room. These small groups are generally built on individual trust. Moreover, in the biodiversity negotiations that produced the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, inviting business associations into the room dissolved the assumption that business would resist a demanding disclosure target. At our event, an expert argued that by being in the negotiation room, business can show how it can contribute. Such trusted relationships are part of the connective infrastructure, and they are its cheapest layer to build.

Policy Recommendations

No single actor can close the implementation gap, or build the infrastructure described above, on its own. COP Presidencies, Parties, the UN system, business and finance, and civil society each hold different levers, and the gap will only start to close when all of them use theirs. Most of these recommendations fall within the wider COP reform debate, and within the options that COP participants support the most: more transparency and a stronger focus on implementation (Koliev et al., 2026).

1. COP Presidencies should keep their priorities consistent from one COP to the next.

This way, the same problems are not reframed every year and announcements made at one COP can be checked at the next. Initiatives would then survive long enough to be tracked, and actors could be measured against what they announced.

2. COP Presidencies should set a price of entry.

A platform moment is one of the most valuable things a Presidency can offer, so it should carry a price of entry, and that price should be demonstrated delivery on past commitments, not sponsorship. Announcements made from that stage should specify what will be done, how, by when and with whom, so that they can be verified later. Those who have not delivered on past commitments should not be given the stage again. Such criteria cannot be applied in the Party-driven negotiations, but they can be applied in the Action Agenda, which Presidencies control. The Action Agenda should therefore be designed around the incentives that actually bring leaders and chief executives into the room.

3. COP Presidencies should listen to all voices.

Presidencies should hold regular, scheduled dialogue with constituencies: Indigenous Peoples and local communities,

women and gender, youth, and business. Importantly, an expert at our event emphasised that most of the action happening in the world comes from outside the negotiation room. Presidencies and negotiators also need to talk to people outside their own community. Those conversations build the trust and information flow that endgame deals depend on.

4. Parties should create regular exposure to the real world for delegates.

Building regular exposure to the real economy and to affected communities into the negotiator's role would keep delegations connected to what implementation requires. This echoes calls for a Head of Implementation in national delegations and our earlier recommendation to appoint implementation focal points (Helfenstein & Pipart, 2026b; Ruchti-Crowley & Watkinson, 2026). It would also help in drafting decisions precisely enough that the actors expected to implement them can recognise themselves, and the signal meant for them, in the text. Parties could also open more rooms to observers and accept scrutiny of whether their negotiating positions match their domestic policy. Both steps would help rebuild the trust that many multilateral processes are steadily losing.

5. The UN system should build open data and transparent infrastructure.

The UN system's contribution is the shared information every actor relies on. That means making data open and granular, and extending transparency norms beyond negotiations to Action Agenda commitments across regimes. The UN80 reform initiative is a ready vehicle. Its environment work package proposes better coordination across secretariats and common indicators for private-sector contributions (United Nations, 2026b).

6. Business and finance should track and disclose delivery on their COP commitments.

Reporting against what they announced, in the same format every year, makes progress comparable rather than open to reframing. They should support, not resist, accountability regimes such as anti-greenwashing rules, because a credible disclosure floor protects companies that deliver from competitors that only announce. Blended finance should be used surgically: public and concessional capital should target the specific risks that block private investment, not act as a general subsidy, so that institutional capital can follow at


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scale. Most importantly, capital holders should say plainly how precise negotiated text needs to be for them to act on it: which entities carry which obligations, over what horizon and on what terms. The vagueness this brief identifies persists partly because the actors who cannot act on it rarely say so in the rooms where text is drafted.

Conclusion

The multilateral system has built something real: shared direction and common frameworks. What it has not built is the means to implement them. Implementation needs different machinery — continuity where there is churn, transparency where there are announcements, granular data where there are aggregates, and structured engagement where there is exclusion. None of this requires renegotiating what has been agreed. It requires all stakeholders to change how they use the system that exists — and to remember that behind every unblocked negotiation sit human relationships built deliberately across group lines.

Change is needed, but it does not have to wait for a new system. CEMUNE's forthcoming report takes up a further question: how negotiations themselves can be rewired, from AI support for small delegations to coalitions that move ahead of the universal process. Multilateralism sets the direction; people, trusted and informed, close the gap.

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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 fourth 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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