

# POLICYBRIEF

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## How the 2024 Summit of the Future Can Advance a “Planetary Commons” Approach to Our Environmental Crisis

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### Recommended Actions:

- Develop a win-win narrative on the environment that resonates with the developing world, major emitters, and the advocacy community.
- Link environmental governance to politically actionable issues like public health, combating inequality, and financing for the developing world.
- Focus on incentives, encouraging large-scale public and private investments in key tipping point arenas for the environment.
- Bolster the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP): grant it responsibility to uphold agreed principles and commitments; capacitate a broader science-policy-action function; equip the programme with investigative capabilities to uncover and report violations; and position UNEP as an organization that can monitor, advise, and support other multilateral organizations.

This policy brief argues that our approach to environmental governance suffers from a critical shortcoming: It attempts to manage issues in silos, while the growing environmental crisis is systemic and interlinked. To address this problem, a group of environmental scientists led by Johan Rockström has put forward a concept of “planetary commons,” which describes the core biophysical functions necessary for Earth’s stability and life on this planet.<sup>1</sup> Recognition of planetary commons would have a revolutionary impact on our environmental governance, requiring significant changes in our international legal framework and the institutions needed to manage the Earth as a single, interlinked system. This brief suggests that such a wholesale transformation may be unlikely in the immediate term, but that the upcoming Summit of the Future offers an important moment to recognize the core concepts underlying the planetary commons and to begin to orient existing institutions and processes towards a more coherent approach to our planetary crisis.<sup>2</sup> It proposes several concrete steps that could be taken by Member States, policymakers, and the scientific community in the lead-up to the Summit.

<sup>1</sup> Johan Rockström et al, *The Planetary Commons: A New Paradigm for Safeguarding Earth-Regulating Systems in the Anthropocene* (PNAS, 2023). Accessible at: <https://www.pnas.org/doi/epdf/10.1073/pnas.2301531121>.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the role of the environment at the Summit, see: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2024/02/un-summit-of-the-future-must-deliver-for-the-planet/>.

## The Problem: We are Destabilizing the Planet

For roughly 12,000 years, we enjoyed relatively stable conditions on Earth: global temperatures tended to stay within a comfortable range for humans, biodiversity experienced steady rates of change, and basic resources like clean air and water were abundant. That era is now over. Today, human activity is causing dramatic changes across a wide range of domains, including rising global temperatures, accelerating biodiversity loss, and large-scale degradation of natural resources. These impacts on the environment are systemic and interrelated. Rising ocean temperatures have a cascading effect on biodiversity and extreme weather around the world; rainforest destruction speeds up global warming, disrupts rainfall patterns, and can cause significant losses of animal life or new pest populations that destroy crops.<sup>3</sup> Change does not stay in the neat categories we use to understand and study the environment.

Our interlinked and accelerating impacts on the planet mean that change is increasingly sudden and surprising. Scientists recently referred to the decreasing ice levels in the Antarctic as “mind-blowing,” saying: “we never thought extreme weather events could happen there.”<sup>4</sup> Last summer, unprecedented wildfires raged across parts of Europe and North America, while South-East Asia and Brazil experienced some of the worst flooding in recorded history, little of which had been anticipated by forecasters.<sup>5</sup> Every single day of 2023 was more than 1°C above pre-industrial levels, and a record number of days were above the critical 1.5°C threshold, shattering scientific expectations about the rate of change.<sup>6</sup> These ruptures with our expectations are increasingly common and are set to become more severe, with massive costs to all of us.<sup>7</sup>

Even more worrying, we are crossing tipping points beyond which scientists warn of catastrophic and irreversible change at the planetary level. Today, there are already enough greenhouse gases in our atmosphere to push global temperatures well above 1.5 °C, even if we stopped all human production and consumption right now.<sup>8</sup> In fact, it is now likely that some form of draw-down of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere – or other forms of so-called “geoengineering” – will be necessary to stay below the 1.5°C guardrail.<sup>9</sup> We have already gone beyond the sea temperature threshold where many of our coral reef systems can survive, meaning the habitat for hundreds of thousands of species may disappear in our lifetimes.<sup>10</sup> In groundbreaking research, Rockström and his colleagues defined nine planetary thresholds necessary for a stable planet, six of which we had already crossed by mid-2023.<sup>11</sup>

What will the result of these changes be on our planet and human survival? What will be the costs, and who is most likely to suffer? We may not have exact answers. But we know that the very systems that kept planet Earth suitable for humans for 12,000 years are becoming unstable, and faster than we expected.

## Our Governance System is Fragmented

The institutions and processes we have built to manage the environment are badly suited to address this kind of interrelated planetary destabilization. Today, there are dozens of separate multilateral agreements designed to manage individual environmental issues. We have standalone conventions on greenhouse gas emissions, the ozone layer, biodiversity, hazardous waste disposal, desertification, and pesticides, to name a few. Each of these has its own membership, its own set of rules, and its

3 See: Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (2015): 171–180; Will Steffen, et al., “The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration,” *The Anthropocene Review* Vol. 2 No. 1 (2015): 81–98; Katherine Richardson et al., “Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries,” *Science Advances* Vol. 9 No. 7 (2023); Anthony D. Barnosky et al., “Has the Earth’s sixth mass extinction already arrived?” *Nature* 471 (2011): 51–57; Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: MacMillan, 2014).<sup>17</sup>

4 Georgina Rannard, Becky Dale, Erwan Rivault, “Antarctic sea-ice at ‘mind-blowing’ low alarms experts,” *BBC News*, 18 Sept. 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-66724246>.

5 Orkhan Huseynli, “The State of the Global Climate in 2023: A Recap,” *Earth.org*, 21 December 2023, <https://earth.org/the-state-of-the-global-climate-in-2023-a-recap/>.

6 Andrea Thompson, “2023 was the hottest year on record by a long shot,” *Scientific American*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/2023-was-the-hottest-year-on-record-by-a-long-shot/>; “Copernicus: 2023 is the hottest year on record, with global temperatures close to the 1.5°C limit,” *Copernicus*, 9 January 2024, <https://climate.copernicus.eu/copernicus-2023-hottest-year-record>.

7 Maximilian Kotz, Anders Levermann, and Leonie Wenz, “The economic commitment of climate change,” *Nature* 628 (2024): 551–557.

8 M.T. Dvorak, et al., “Estimating the timing of geophysical commitment to 1.5 and 2.0 °C of global warming,” *Nature Climate Change* 12 (2022): 547–552.

9 For this debate, see, Carlos Anchoy and E&E News “Limiting Global Warming to 1.5 Degrees C ‘Remains Possible,’ Energy Experts Say,” *Scientific American*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/limiting-global-warming-to-1-5-degrees-c-remains-possible-energy-experts-say/>; “Carbon Removal,” *World Resources Institute*, last accessed on 24 April 2024, <https://www.wri.org/initiatives/carbon-removal>; Peter Schlosser and Julie Ann Wrigley, “The 1.5 C global warming limit is still within grasp – here’s how we can reach it,” *World Economic Forum*, 5 December 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/12/1-5-degrees-global-warming-limit-climate-change-cop-27/>. For a wonderful description of existing geoengineering efforts, see, Elizabeth Kolbert, *Under a White Sky: The Nature of the Future* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2021).

10 See, IUCN, “Issues Brief: Coral Reefs and Climate Change” (2017). Accessible at: <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-brief/coral-reefs-and-climate-change>.

11 Steffen Richardson et al., “All planetary boundaries mapped out for the first time, six of nine crossed,” *Stockholm Resilience Centre*, 13 September 2023, <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/research-news/2023-09-13-all-planetary-boundaries-mapped-out-for-the-first-time-six-of-nine-crossed.html>.

own bodies of scientific knowledge. If you read a report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it will provide detailed, scientifically rigorous information about how human activity is driving climate change, but little about biodiversity loss or pollution, despite the clear linkages across these domains.

The result is that our collective efforts to manage environmental change do not match up with the reality that our planet is changing as a whole. If we wanted to fully understand and mitigate the interrelated impacts of fossil fuel use, biodiversity loss, and pollution, we would need to work across at least four different international bodies, each with different governance regimes, siloed sources of information, and membership. This creates enormous challenges if we want to generate the kind of behavioural and institutional change needed to steer human activity within a range that can avoid far more destabilizing impacts on the planet.

Our fractured governance regime suits many of the most important actors today, especially those benefiting from the status quo. High emitting countries and companies responsible for much of the world's environmental degradation benefit from disaggregated information and standalone national reporting on these issues because it minimizes our ability to understand the full impact of their activities. Developing countries wishing to concentrate on fossil fuels to accelerate their progress can count on the slow, incremental COP processes to do little to restrain them, while the incentives to transition to green energy are too slow in arriving.

It is not surprising then that efforts to create a more holistic approach to the environment have failed so far. In 2017, France spearheaded an initiative to create a non-binding "Global Pact for the Environment," which initially received positive attention from the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> However, reality quickly set in: Member States objected to the creation of new legal obligations that might impinge on their sovereignty; developing countries pushed back against perceived efforts to limit carbon-based energy and industry; and those who had spent years achieving difficult wins on specific environmental issues saw little

benefit in a global, non-binding pact that could risk backsliding on key issues already in existing treaties. Other efforts to push for a unified governance body for the planet have suffered a similar fate: few people today are seriously considering proposals to repurpose the UN Trusteeship Council to become a guardian of the planet, or the idea to establish a new Global Environmental Agency.<sup>13</sup> Even the relatively modest proposal to create an IPCC-like scientific body to report on planetary changes as a whole may face an uphill battle.<sup>14</sup>

### Can the "Global Commons" Help?

Fortunately, we already have a well-established body of international law to manage some of our most important environmental domains. The "global commons" refers to natural resources and areas that are considered beyond the national jurisdiction of any single country and are treated as collective resources for our survival as a species. Today, international treaties recognize the high seas, the atmosphere, Antarctica, and outer space as global commons.<sup>15</sup> While these treaties have important differences, they all consider the global commons as a collective resource that must be shared equitably and protected for the collective good of humanity.

The concept of global commons is not a panacea. In fact, global commons treaties focus mainly on preventing one State from exploiting natural resources more than other States, not on ensuring the sustainability of the resource as a whole. As such, the global commons are better thought of as a way to exclude national jurisdiction from parts of the world that don't fall within State boundaries. Waters more than 200 miles off coastlines, the atmosphere moving above the surface of the Earth, the uninhabited ice shelves of Antarctica, the reaches of outer space: all of these have the character of being outside the neat Westphalian lines we draw around States. The logic of the global commons is therefore more about exclusion and fairness of access than protection per se, and certainly not about the complex interactions driving our environmental crisis today.

This raises the question: what about human activity within

12 H.E. Mr. Miroslav Lajčák, President of the 72nd Session of the UN General Assembly, "Statement at the Summit on a Global Pact for the Environment," 19 September 2017, <https://www.un.org/pga/72/2017/09/19/summit-on-a-global-pact-for-the-environment/>.

13 For some of these proposals, see, e.g., Augusto Lopez-Claros, Arthur L. Dahl, and Maja Groff, *Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Bharat H. Desai, "The Repurposed UN Trusteeship Council for the Future," *Environment Policy and Law* Vol. 52 No. 3-4 (2022): 223-235.

14 See HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet* (New York: United Nations University, 2023). Accessible at: <https://highleveladvisoryboard.org/breakthrough/>.

15 The 2023 treaty on marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction is a step towards a recognition that biodiversity may have the character of a global commons as well. See: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea: <https://www.un.org/Depts/los/bbnj.htm>.

States that has a global impact? Our cars, planes, construction sites, factories, farmlands, and cities collectively cause massive environmental harm at the planetary level, but they tend to occur within national boundaries. The concept of global commons – rooted in a territorial notion of needing to exclude certain domains from national jurisdiction – doesn’t work in this case. We need a different approach that recognizes interrelated impacts across time and space, one that captures how the destruction of a rainforest or production of harmful chemicals in one part of the world can have a planetary effect.

### Towards “Planetary Commons”

The proposal put forward by Rockström and his colleagues would adapt and expand the concept of global commons to one of “planetary commons.”<sup>16</sup> Whereas global commons refer to specific regions and/or territories that lie beyond national jurisdiction, planetary commons are defined by the function they play in preserving planetary stability. In simplified terms, the planetary commons are the functions and integrity of the major “spheres”: the atmosphere (air),

hydrosphere (water), biosphere (life), lithosphere (land), and cryosphere (ice/snow). These spheres exist within and across national boundaries and are defined by their necessary relationship to a stable planet fit for human survival.

Crucially, the planetary commons concept includes the tipping elements, where these spheres might change irreparably and threaten global instability. For example, deforestation and climate change could “tip” the Amazon into a savannah-like state, with widespread impacts for climate, biodiversity, and water resources. The planetary commons framework identifies a range of systems that play a vital role in regulating the livability and stability of Earth, such as the mangrove forests, tidal marshes, coral reef systems, and temperate forests. If one of these natural resources is depleted or destabilized sufficiently, it could trigger a collapse or irreversible decline of the sphere, causing a further destabilization of the planet as a whole. So protecting the planetary commons also means protecting these tipping elements and other key regulating systems.

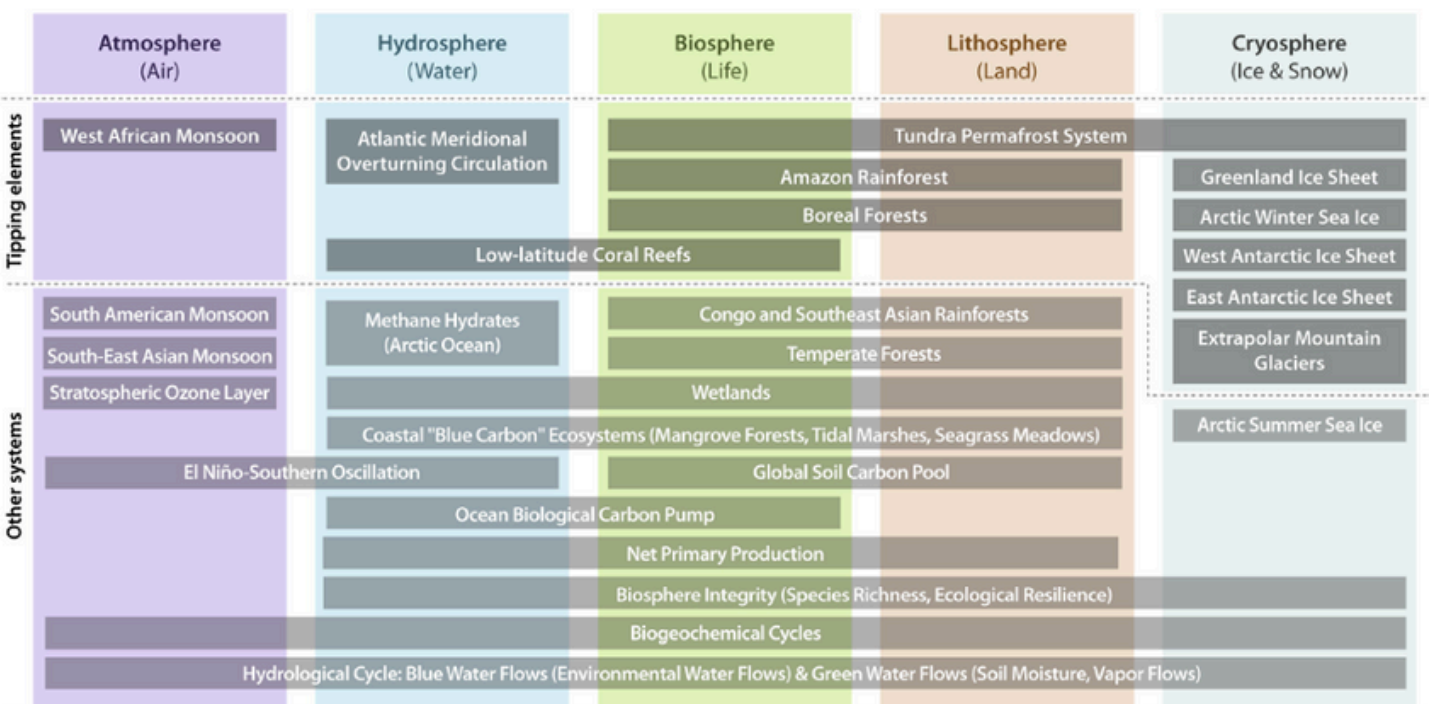


Figure 1: The planetary commons tipping points, from Rockström et al.

16 Johan Rockström et al, “The Planetary Commons: A New Paradigm for Safeguarding Earth-Regulating Systems in the Anthropocene.”

Unlike global commons, which are primarily concerned with excluding national jurisdiction over a territory, planetary commons aims to protect key tipping elements and other systems that regulate the stability of our planet. Like global commons, this would require a recognition of the collective benefits of preserving these, and likely some form of legal framework to enshrine a global commitment. But it would go further, requiring some form of regulation of activity within national boundaries to prevent the destruction of resources crucial to planetary stability.

### Obstacles and Opportunities

Challenges to a planetary commons approach are easy to anticipate, but difficult to overcome. They can be loosely grouped into four kinds of objection:

**1. Sovereignty:** Member States will argue that they have a sovereign right to exploit resources within their national boundaries. While there are some exceptions under international law (for example the prohibition of polluting transboundary rivers), in general States are permitted to exploit the resources within their territorial jurisdiction. The global commons regime in some respects reinforces this form of sovereignty by creating limited areas that are beyond national jurisdiction (the implication being that everything else is fair game). Telling countries that there are restrictions on what they can do with their natural resources is sure to provoke the kind of backlash that scuttled the 2017 effort to agree on a global pact on the environment.

**2. Success:** 2023 was an important year for environmental governance, with the passage of a landmark treaty on marine biodiversity and significant progress on a treaty that will regulate plastic pollution worldwide. COP 28 moved the world closer to a decarbonization commitment, and the G20 agreement in India generated significant new commitments to fund climate adaptation in developing countries. In discussions with serious environmental advocates, many suggest that we should focus on the existing processes and forums that are generating traction and success today. One expert responding to the planetary commons idea argued: “Why should we put time and energy into a non-starter idea that might even set us back

decades?” Proponents of the planetary commons will need to find convincing arguments that this is a concept worth fighting for, amidst myriad other live battles and frayed attention spans.

**3. Uncertainty:** Unlike global commons, which can be understood over a map, planetary commons require a sophisticated scientific understanding of how different parts of the environment rely on each other, and a recognition of indirect chains of cause and effect. Big industry loves this kind of complexity and uncertainty – it allows them to say we need more scientific proof before we can regulate.<sup>17</sup> Politicians hate uncertainty – it poses risks that they struggle to manage, particularly when change extends over longer periods of time. Even with extraordinarily high levels of scientific consensus that human activity is driving global warming, for example, we have failed to take sufficiently robust action on climate change. Complex, systemic change is difficult to understand, explain, or land in a political system that gravitates strongly towards lowest common denominator outcomes and “quick wins” for busy politicians.

**4. Language:** A Zeitgeist of 2023–24 is the growing willingness of the so-called “Global South” to call out the unfair systems of the current global governance regime. Important proposals like Mia Mottley’s Bridgetown Initiative and widespread calls for an overhaul of the international financial architecture suggest that the voice of developing countries will (rightly) drive much of the international reform agenda. In this context, the framing of environmental issues around concepts like “planetary boundaries,” a “triple planetary crisis,” and “planetary commons” encounters strong resistance from parts of the developing world, many of whom see this narrative as the Global North attempting to limit their development. How to frame environmental protection as necessary for meeting the needs of the developing world is a major challenge (though helped by the increasingly tangible reality that development requires a sustainable, stable planet).

These are serious obstacles to anyone interested in improving environmental governance, and they are especially high hurdles for those promoting a planetary co-

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent description of these debates, see Roger. A.Pielke, *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

commons approach. At a moment when geopolitics are fraught, fractured, and drifting rapidly towards ultranationalist positions, now may feel like one of the worst times to try to land a proposal that would require major conceptual and legal changes to our existing global governance architecture.

At the same time, our environmental crisis is real and accelerating. Continuing on our current path of carbon-based energy use, massive overuse of natural resources, and widespread pollution is certain to drive us towards further crisis points and irreversible damage to our planet. Whether or not it is politically palatable, we continue to race across irreversible planetary thresholds, and this means we will need some way to grapple with the interconnected changes humans are imposing on the planet. While there are no easy answers, here are several steps that could be considered in the lead up to the 2024 Summit of the Future.

**1. A win-win narrative:** Maybe the most important step needed to land something like the planetary commons concept is a narrative that resonates with key constituencies, including the developing world, major emitters, and the environmental advocacy community. Declaring a “planetary emergency” at the Summit of the Future could help drive momentum, but it would also need to be accompanied by points that bring all key constituencies on board. For example, messages could include: (a) an unstable environment is a direct threat to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);<sup>18</sup> (b) the uncertainty and volatility posed by sudden environmental change is a direct risk to global business and effective trade;<sup>19</sup> and (c) a more coherent understanding and approach to interrelated environmental change will strengthen (not undermine) the basis for existing and new environmental commitments. This narrative would help to inject messaging into areas of the Summit of the Future that are currently lacking any real environmental focus and would reflect the reality that an unstable planet poses risks to all of our collective goals.

**2. Incentives, not restrictions:** An approach to planetary commons that focuses on restricting the use of natural resources will run directly into the wall of sovereignty. But what if some form of “global public goods” framing was used? Take the Amazon rainforest as an example. One approach would be to say the rainforest is a tipping element resource for the biosphere and atmosphere, so Brazil should be prevented from cutting it down. But, that’s a non-starter, even for the fairly left-wing Lula Government. Instead, we could describe the rainforest as a collective benefit for the whole world (it is), create a trust fund to protect and conserve it, and invest in it collectively in the same way every country pays into the International Civil Aviation Authority.<sup>20</sup> Shifting towards the question of how we will collectively invest in key tipping element resources may help dilute the sovereignty concerns and advance the kind of outcome proposed by the planetary commons concept. It can also be a vehicle for advancing the “common but differentiated” language that helps issues resonate with developing countries. Many of the most important investments that would be required to protect the tipping points identified in the planetary commons model would be in the developing world, thus aligning planetary commons with the broader push for justice and equitable development.

**3. Link the environment to politically actionable issues like public health and combating inequality:** Environmental change is having a massive and disastrous effect on global public health. Crop failures are creating food shortages and malnutrition; extreme heat is reducing the number of hours it is safe to work in some regions; and poor air quality drives millions into early death or hospitalizations.<sup>21</sup> A massive and well-resourced public health industry therefore has a huge incentive to support even incremental improvements in the environment. Speaking in terms of a public health crisis can help move into the sphere of actionable items for politicians, as was shown by COP28’s declaration on climate and health.<sup>22</sup> Identifying other issues where political leaders have a clear, short-term incentive

18 For an excellent description of these debates, see Roger. A. Pielke, *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

19 UNDP, *Climate Risks in the Industrial Sector* (New York: UNDP, 2023). Accessible at: <https://www.unepfi.org/themes/climate-change/climate-risks-in-the-industrial-sector/#:~:text=Relying%20on%20stable%20climate%20conditions,practices%20more%20difficult%20or%20risky;Amar%20Rahman,%20Here's%20how%20climate%20change%20will%20impact%20businesses%20everywhere%20and%20what%20can%20be%20done,> Zurich Insurance Group, 20 April 2023, <https://www.zurich.com/en/knowledge/topics/climate-change/how-climate-change-will-impact-business-everywhere>.

20 See: “Rainforests provide a public good. The world should pay to conserve them,” *The Economist*, 2 December 2023, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2023/12/02/rainforests-provide-a-global-public-good-so-the-world-should-pay-to-conserve-them>; Carlos Nobre and Dolores Armenteras, “Protecting global public goods fairly”, *SDG Action*, 12 October 2022, <https://sdg-action.org/protecting-global-public-goods-fairly%E2%82%AC%80/>.

21 Lei Bian and Elizabeth Robinson, “How can we better handle the global ‘public goods’ of health and climate mitigation and adaptation?” *London School of Economics*, 3 December 2023, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/granthaminstitute/news/how-can-we-better-handle-the-global-public-goods-of-health-and-climate-mitigation-and-adaptation/>.

22 COP28, COP28 Declaration on Climate & Health (2023). Accessible at: <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/COP28-Health-Declaration-En-FIN.pdf>.

to make decisions may be the best way to inject the planetary commons discourse into the Summit of the Future and beyond. Perhaps the most important of these will be how to leverage the SDGs to combat global inequality. Here, the work of the Club of Rome in its *Earth For All* book offers a crucial finding: combating inequality is the best and only way to address our planetary crisis.<sup>23</sup>

**4. Bolster the UN Environment Programme (UNEP):** Faced with the global challenge of environmental instability, it may feel intuitive to push for a global regulatory body to address it. The tendency to create a leviathan to confront a planetary problem is extremely strong.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, many of the highest-profile proposals – including Rockström’s – suggest that we will need an apex body to govern the environment.<sup>25</sup> But there is a significant difference between an apex regulatory body (tasked with enforcing binding rules) and an institution tasked with connecting existing bodies in a more networked manner. The former is a non-starter in today’s political climate, whereas the latter could generate some support. For example, the planetary commons approach could be at least partially addressed by a strengthened UNEP along the following lines:

**a. Upholding a set of agreed principles and commitments on planetary boundaries,** with a baseline understanding that our goal is to stay within the safe operating space for humanity. These principles could act as connective tissue across existing legal frameworks (e.g. climate, biodiversity, pollution) but would not necessarily require a single treaty. They could be linked to a judicial body (such as a set of judges in the International Court of Justice), or they could be tracked within the domestic legislation of States.<sup>26</sup> One of the most important functions could be enabling and capacitating more national governments to enact ecological legislation, and to accelerate the incorporation of environmental issues into other bodies of law.<sup>27</sup>

**b. A science-policy-action function.** A major shortcoming of today’s governance system is that infor-

mation is siloed across different arenas. This year’s Global Environmental Outlook is hoping to address this problem by offering a planetary assessment of the environment. Building on this, could UNEP be capacitated with a broader science-policy-action function, a sort of “IPCC for the planet” where the best scientific information is fed into a coherent, constantly updated, policy-oriented resource.<sup>28</sup>

**c. An investigation/reporting function** where violations of environmental rights and commitments would be referred to relevant authorities.<sup>29</sup> Just as the UN Human Rights Council is able to form independent investigations into human rights violations, an effective environmental governance system would need greater capacities to respond to signals of environmental harm. Public reporting forums too could help build greater transparency and independent sources of information on environmental harms. This would create a more robust and independent feedback loop for our environmental governance system, moving beyond the current system in which national governments are often solely responsible for reporting on environmental issues.

**d. Networking our institutions** by creating a common set of sustainability criteria across all major multilateral bodies. This could be achieved by agreeing on a common set of planetary thresholds that would need to be considered as core objectives of every multilateral body, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Labor Organization, and others. One of UNEP’s roles could be to monitor, advise, and support these organizations in upholding their commitments, providing real-time responses and capacity support. An initiative that began in 2023 and focuses on greening the WTO shows the promise of such an approach in one of the most critical areas of global governance.<sup>30</sup> Complexity-driven studies have also shown the enormous potential for small shifts in global trade to have a massive impact on environmental issues.<sup>31</sup>

23 See: <https://earth4all.life/the-book/>.

24 Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018).

25 See, e.g., Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer, *A World Environment Organization: Solution or Threat for Effective International Environmental Governance?* (Routledge, 2005); Anne McMillan, “Time for a World Court for the Environment,” *International Bar Association*, November 2019, <https://www.ibanet.org/article/71B817C7-8026-48DE-8744-50D227954E04>.

26 For an example of this kind of tracking, see: <https://climate-laws.org/>.

27 Excellent ideas on this front are found in Carl Folke, Thomas Hahn, and Jon Norberg, “Adaptive Governance of Social-Ecological Systems,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* Vol. 30 No. 1 (2005): 441-473; Louis J. Kotzé and Rakhyun E. Kim, “Earth system law: The juridical dimensions of earth system governance,” *Earth System Governance* 1 (2019); Ahjond S. Garmestani et al., “The Integration of Social-Ecological Resilience and Law,” *Social-Ecological Resilience and Law* eds. A. Garmestani and C. Allen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); J.B. Ruhl, “General Design Principles for Resilience and Adaptive Capacity in Legal Systems – with Applications in Climate Change Adaptation,” *North Carolina Law Review* Vol. 89 (2011): 1373.

28 See: HLAB, *A Breakthrough for People and Planet*.

29 United Nations General Assembly, “Resolution 76/300, adopted by the General Assembly during its 76th Session,” United Nations, 28 July 2022, A/RES/76/300.

30 See: “Villars-sur-Ollon, Switzerland – March, 2023,” *Remaking Trade for a Sustainable Future*, last accessed on 1 May 2024, <https://remakingtradeproject.org/villars>.

31 Jean Frederic Morin, et al., “The Trade Regime as a Complex Adaptive System: Exploration and Exploitation of Environmental Norms in Trade Agreements,” *Journal of International Economic Law* Vol. 20 (2017): 365.

**e. Enabling a shift in our investments** by monitoring a set of agreed conditions for international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF. For example, international investments might need to demonstrate net zero carbon emissions and a nature-positive set of outcomes to keep us within planetary boundaries.<sup>32</sup> UNEP could sit on the boards of these bodies to ensure their decision-making processes reflected early consideration of these conditions, and the trajectory of international investments could form a more direct part of reporting on commitments.

This kind of networked and embedded function for UNEP could help to achieve what Rockström refers to as “nested” governance arrangements, where local, national, and international governance systems are better connected, and where the financial and social drivers of change are more easily harnessed.

These are just a few of the ways the Summit of the Future could add momentum and focus to the most important issue of our time: a planetary crisis that has already arrived.

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<sup>32</sup> One proposal along this line would see conditions placed on the Green Climate Fund. See: Harro van Asselt and F Zelli, “Connect the Dots: Managing the Fragmentation of Global Climate Governance,” *Earth Systems Governance Working Paper 25* (2012).