

Can the New Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution Succeed?

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Science-policy interfaces (SPIs) are an increasingly important feature of the United Nations system, helping to generate, assess and mobilize scientific knowledge for policymakers. Recent efforts to establish new SPIs in areas including artificial intelligence, chemicals, waste and pollution, and antimicrobial resistance demonstrate growing demand for these institutions. Yet questions remain about how SPIs should be designed to ensure they are effective, adaptable and able to support policy decisions. Convened by the Global Governance Innovation (GGI) Platform, this collection brings together four experts who examine key design considerations, including governance structures, participation, institutional learning and knowledge uptake. Together, the contributions highlight lessons for building SPIs that can effectively support global governance challenges.

In globally turbulent times, with heightened competition and conflict among countries, disagreements reverberate across the United Nations and the broader global governance system. Global science-policy panels, some set up several decades ago and some more recently, are not immune to negative spillover effects from external political tensions. Member States participating in such panels have varying opinions on how they should operate and what they should produce. As most countries still advocate for and engage in multilateralism, this raises questions about how to design collaborative global science-policy panels that are well positioned to produce scientific assessments to effectively inform policymaking, now and in the future.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution (ISP-CWP), established in June 2025, is one of the newest global science-policy panels.¹ Its creation involved not only negotiations among countries, but also engagement with natural and social scientists.² Ongoing efforts to make the ISP-CWP operational must navigate politically tumultuous times while making decisions that are critical to how the Panel functions. These decisions have important implications for the ability of the ISP-CWP to carry out authoritative assessments that inform debates and policymaking in support of enhanced sound management of chemicals and waste.

Each global science-policy panel is partly unique and operates within its own issue domain. As such, applying a simple “copy and paste” approach to the ISP-CWP based on a combination of how the other two major global environmental science-policy panels – the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) – function would be ill-advised.³ For the ISP-CWP, it is critical that Member States tailor its structure and operation to the specifics of chemicals and waste pollution issues and associated knowledge bases and management needs.

The first plenary session of ISP-CWP Member States in Geneva in February 2026 was intended to pass several important decisions related to setting up the Panel. But it quickly became marred by procedural wranglings.⁴ Since the Panel’s rules of procedure were never adopted, Member States failed to adopt the agenda of the meeting and did not decide on the location of the secretariat, the establishment of a trust fund or a plan for intersessional work before the next plenary session. In the end, not even the meeting report was adopted. In addition, critical aspects of what the Panel will do and how it will function were left unresolved.

1 Earth Negotiations Bulletin, “Summary of the resumed third session of the Ad Hoc Open-ended Working Group on Science-Policy Panel to Contribute Further to the Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste and to Prevent Pollution and the Intergovernmental Meeting: 15–20 June 2025”, 2025. Available at <https://enb.iisd.org/oewg3-2-science-policy-panel-contribute-sound-management-chemicals-waste-prevent-pollution>.

2 Zhanyun Wang and others, “We need a global science-policy body on chemicals and waste: major gaps in current efforts limit policy responses”, *Science*, vol. 371, No. 6531 (2021). Available at <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.abe9090>; Marlene Ågestrand and others, “Key principles for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals and Waste”, *Environmental Science & Technology*, vol. 57 (2023). Available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.2c08283>; Miriam L. Diamond and others, “Exploring outputs of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution Prevention”, *Environmental Science & Technology Letters*, vol. 11, No. 7 (2024). Available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.estlett.4c00294>; Jen Iris Allan and others, “Rethinking the science-policy interface for chemicals, waste, and pollution: challenging core assumptions”, *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 92 (2025). Available at https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378025000329?_cf_chLrt_tk=C4Siq0E70fY.NuxtYadtWqvNCFammRaS_1beKc.OmEO-1781627562-1.0.1.1-xHN7qB1l64.dqsuxTQyqZUQ72bqFPvVn3XGyszDXCdQ.

3 Jen Iris Allan and others, “Rethinking the science-policy interface for chemicals, waste, and pollution: challenging core assumptions”.

4 Earth Negotiations Bulletin, “Summary of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution: 2–6 February 2026”, 2026. Available at: <https://enb.iisd.org/isp-cwp-p1-intergovernmental-science-policy-panel-chemicals-waste-pollution-summary>.

The stated objective of the ISP-CWP in Article 1 of its foundational document is “to strengthen the science-policy interface to contribute to the sound management of chemicals and waste and pollution prevention”.⁵ As the political process of moving from paper to action on the ISP-CWP continues to advance under the careful guidance of the Panel’s first chair, Osvaldo Álvarez Pérez from Chile, three sets of issues are central to the Panel’s ability to meet its stated objective: i) legitimacy and participation, ii) engagement of experts and iii) focus and function of assessments.

First, the legitimacy of the ISP-CWP will be influenced by its ability to attract globally widespread Member States. By April 2026, 131 countries had become members. Positively, this includes the United States. Shortly after President Trump in early January 2026 announced that the United States would leave a host of international organizations and bodies – including the IPCC and IPBES – the United States joined the ISP-CWP. As such, the United States is a member alongside Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, a host of members of the European Union, and other countries from all over the world.

Of course, membership does not equal constructive engagement (as seen at the February 2026 plenary session), but the perceived legitimacy of the ISP-CWP will be shaped by its ability to attract more Member States (and keep existing ones). In the United Nations system, legitimacy is closely tied to broad State participation. ISP-CWP membership is open to all United Nations Member States, but States must also want to, and be able to, attend meetings and engage in the Panel’s assessments. With respect to such ability, levels of funding for supporting developing country participation and capacity-building will almost certainly be hotly contested topics.

Second, Member States must make decisions about how the ISP-CWP and its assessments will involve experts, who in many cases work outside the national governments of Member States. As an intergovernmental panel, all decisions will (rightly) ultimately be made by Member States, but the ability to carry out meaningful and credible assessments requires assembling relevant expertise and integrating knowledge from different fields and sources. This raises important questions about how the experts that carry out the assessments and write the associated reports are appointed, what their backgrounds are and what roles they play in the assessments.

⁵ United Nations Environment Program, *Foundational document of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution* (UNEP 2025). Available at: <https://wedocs.unep.org/rest/api/core/bitstreams/043e14ce-afbe-48fd-8f01-3a6f51e59431/content>.

One contentious aspect of expert involvement involves industry. Chemical firms and industrial organizations have long lobbied against government controls and stringent international chemicals treaties. Yet, much information about individual chemicals and their production is held by firms and is only sometimes known by national authorities. Such knowledge matters greatly, since an estimated 350,000 chemicals and chemical mixtures are registered for production and use in national and regional inventories.⁶ Industry knowledge is also critical when assessing alternatives to specific hazardous chemicals and their uses as well as reviewing waste management options.

Given the current chemical data situation, there is no question about whether industry representatives will be part of ISP-CWP assessments, but rather how. This puts a focus on conflict-of-interest rules and disclosure for industry representatives and other experts.⁷ Here, highly successful industry participation in the Technology and Economic Assessment Panel (TEAP) under the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Stratospheric Ozone Layer over the past three decades can serve as inspiration for the development of standards for industry participation in the ISP-CWP. Conflict-of-interest rules for TEAP members have also been updated over time, showing that adjustments can be made.

Traditionally, global environmental assessments have been dominated by people with natural science backgrounds in measurements and modelling. Their participation in ISP-CWP assessments will of course be central, but it is increasingly also acknowledged that involving researchers from the social sciences and humanities could strengthen assessments.⁸ Furthermore, some environmental assessments have begun to incorporate Indigenous and local knowledge.⁹ The foundational document of the ISP-CWP explicitly recognizes Indigenous knowledge and local knowledge as relevant sources of information.

6 Zhanyun Wang and others, "Towards a global understanding on chemicals pollution: a first comprehensive analysis of national and regional chemical inventories", *Environmental Science & Technology*, vol. 54, No. 5 (2020). Available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.9b06379>.

7 Andreas Schäffer and others, "Conflict of interest in the assessment of chemicals, waste and pollution", *Environmental Science & Technology*, vol. 57, No. 48 (2023). Available at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.3c04213>.

8 David Victor, "Climate change: embed the social sciences in climate policy", *Nature*, vol. 520 (2015). Available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/520027a>; Anne Larigauderie and others, "IPBES reaches out to social scientists", *Nature*, vol. 532 (2016). Available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/532313c>; Noel Castree and others, "The future of global environmental assessments: making a case for fundamental change", *The Anthropocene Review*, vol. 8, No. 1 (2021). Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2053019620971664>; Anthony Patt and others, "International cooperation", in *Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change — Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, P.R. Shukla and others, eds. (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2022).

9 J. Peter Brosius, "What counts as local knowledge in global environmental assessments and conventions?", in *Bridging Scales and Knowledge Systems: Concepts and Applications in Ecosystem Assessment*, Walter V. Reid and others, eds. (Washington, D.C., Island Press, 2006); Pamela McElwee and others, "Working with indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) in large-scale ecological assessments: reviewing the experience of the IPBES Global Assessment", *Journal of Applied Ecology*, vol. 57 (2020). Available at <https://besjournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1365-2664.13705>.

Third, Member States must decide on what kind of assessments they want ISP-CWP to produce. Levels of, and the environmental and human health effects of, pollution from specific chemicals and waste vary significantly across different regions, places and groups of people. As such, globally focused approaches and assessments based on a single global indicator or global average risk obfuscating more than illuminating pollution problems from chemicals and waste.¹⁰ This means that Member States need to think carefully about what they want in terms of globally and regionally focused assessments.

As there are hundreds of thousands of chemicals in production and use and waste streams are large and complex, no single assessment can cover all chemicals and waste. Consequently, ISP-CWP Member States must decide which subset of chemicals and waste an individual assessment will centre on, including for “horizon scanning” purposes to identify emerging issues. Assessments can either be framed around a subset of chemicals and waste that share similar inherent characteristics such as persistent organic pollutants (POPs) and POPs waste, or they can be designed to look at chemical use in specific sectors, such as the agricultural production of specific crops, or waste in specific sectors such as shipping.

Early global environmental assessments, including on chemicals and waste, focused mainly on synthesizing existing information about a specific environmental issue to examine its status or monitor changes over time. While such assessments can be critical to better understand an issue, they are less well suited for thinking about and identifying possible solutions. This has resulted in calls for more solutions-oriented assessments that also consider how the positive and negative effects of alternative solutions are distributed across different groups of people.¹¹ The ISP-CWP foundational document also stresses the role of assessments in identifying potential evidence-based options to address issues.

In sum, ISP-CWP Member States continue to navigate choppy political waters. But even as many global science-policy panels are under growing pressure, it is still the case that almost all the world’s countries express continuing support for multilateral cooperation. The degree to which ISP-CWP Member States can find common ground despite having varying visions for the Panel will be critical to ensure its longer-term ability to strengthen the science-policy interface and contribute to the sound management of chemicals and waste and pollution prevention. After all, why agree to set up the Panel only to then immediately just watch it wither and die?

10 Henrik Selin and Noelle Eckley Selin, “Alternatives to planetary boundaries can enhance policy-science linkages for chemicals governance”, *Earth System Governance*, vol. 27 (2026). Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2589811626000029>.

11 Noel Castree and others, “The future of global environmental assessments: making a case for fundamental change”; Silke Beck and others, “Urgent need to move towards solution-oriented environmental assessments”, *One Earth*, vol. 5, No. 6 (2022). Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590332222002767>; Hakon Stokland and others, “Making global environmental assessments fit for future challenges”, *Environmental Science and Policy*, vol. 180 (2026). Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1462901126000845>.