

Policy Brief

Input to the first session of the Plenary of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution (ISP-CWP) in Geneva, Switzerland on 2-6 February 2026

Multilateralism as the Basis for the ISP-CWP's Work

Chemical pollution, as one part of the triple planetary crisis, “knows no boundaries”. The lack of boundaries to contain pollution and pollution’s global spread is of growing concern. Chemicals and waste move within and among states by natural processes such as winds and ocean currents. Human activity, notably trade, is greatly accelerating their movement. Further, pollution and waste are increasing as chemical production grows along with the proliferation of the number of chemicals.

Multilateralism at the core of Environmental Policy

Multilateralism stands for cooperation among a group of states in arrangements and agreements that are valid and useful for all of them, based on reciprocity and shared goals. It is the basis of international cooperation within the UN system.

Multilateral discussions and agreements operating within the UN system for over 50 years worked to overcome major challenges. Examples include reducing the impacts of acid rain (Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution or LRTAP, signed in 1979) and tackling the stratospheric ozone depletion (Montreal Protocol, signed in 1987). Multilateral discussions and agreements transcend the territory and political influence of single states, leading to benefits that affect many states simultaneously. Multilateral discussions are effective by providing a forum for all states, large and small, to raise concerns, come to agreement, and develop agency.

Obstacles to multilateralism are increasing in current world geopolitics and in the environmental arena, as illustrated by the collapsed efforts to negotiate a multilateral treaty to reduce plastic pollution.

Hope for Multilateralism

Even though obstacles persist, the ISP-CWP also begins its life with evidence that multilateralism is working. In spring 2025, the Conferences of the Parties of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions adopted 29 decisions, including the listing of three new persistent organic pollutants (POPs). The 6th Conference of the Parties to the Minamata Convention adopted 21 decisions, including the phase-out of mercury-containing dental amalgams by 2034, and to cooperate to address biodiversity loss. Additional inspiration can be drawn from the “Kigali process”, which enabled the amendment of the Montreal Protocol beyond ozone depleting substances to include hydrofluorocarbons, which are potent greenhouse gases. The “Kigali process” rested on the combination of science, policy development and clever diplomacy.

The power of Multilateralism in the ISP-CWP

There is power in information, particularly when that information is a globally agreed-upon synthesis of knowledge that can lead to policy development. For the ISP-CWP, multilateralism can foster a credible and robust process of knowledge gathering, synthesis and communication. The power of this process in other arenas is visible from the authoritative summaries of knowledge from science and other knowledge systems provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The new ISP-CWP, through a multilateral process, can help countries to develop policies and an enabling environment to act on the chemical pollution crisis.

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For detailed background information, please refer to our publication: Diamond, Sigmund et al. 2026. A Call to Action: Engaging with the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Panel on Chemicals, Waste and Pollution. ES&T
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CONTACT

Martin Scheringer, ETH Zürich
scheringer@usys.ethz.ch

Miriam Diamond, University of Toronto,
miriam.diamond@utoronto.ca

Gabriel Sigmund, Wageningen University
gabriel.sigmund@wur.nl