

The “Triple COP” Year 2026: Multilateral Environmental Governance between Geopolitical Disruption and Institutional Reform

Semi-plenary Roundtable Discussion
Bath Conference on Earth System Governance
8-10 September, University of Bath, UK

**2026 Bath Conference Semi-Plenary 1.02 [hybrid]
Tuesday, 8 September 2026, 3:30-5:00 p.m.
Room: Lansdown, Venue: Apex**

Notwithstanding the bleak backdrop of ecological polycrisis and geopolitical disruption, multilateral environmental governance continues to operate, sustaining institutional routines at technical as well as at political levels. Contrary to what has been augured, especially after the Trump II administration’s withdrawal from the IPCC and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) earlier this year, states are not abandoning multilateral environmental institutions in droves. Indeed, the second half of 2026 alone will see a quick succession of major multilateral conferences. At the time of the Bath Conference on Earth System Governance the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) will just have concluded its 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) in Mongolia; COP17 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Armenia and COP31 of the UNFCCC are all set to convene in Armenia in October and in Türkiye in November respectively, to be swiftly followed by the UN Water Conference in the United Arab Emirates in early December. Hence, multilateral environmentalism is far from dead. That is not to say that all is well. It is evident that multilateral environmental institutions need to shift gears if they are to deliver more effective responses to global ecological challenges, even amid geopolitical disruption. Now what?

We argue that the disruptive dynamics of geopolitics constitute not only an imperative to reform, but an opportunity for reforming. In this semi-plenary, we convene a roundtable of eminent scholars of multilateral environmental governance and engage the ESG community to discuss that proposition.

Roundtable speakers (in alphabetical order)

Joanna Depledge (University of Cambridge), Dhanasree Jayaram (Manipal Institute of Social Sciences), Kennedy Mbeva (University of Cambridge), Susan Park (University of Sidney), Lindsay C. Stringer (York University), Fariborz Zelli (Lund University)

Convenor

Steffen Bauer (IDOS)



Tentative format and agenda

- I. Intro and framing: Steffen (2 + 5 mins)
- II. Three interventions [tentative working titles], representing expertise on the three Rio conventions (3 x 8 mins)
 - a. Joanna Depledge – Of good COPs and bad COPs: insights from 30 years of multilateral climate governance
 - b. Fariborz Zelli – The state of multilateral environmental institutions and lessons from the sphere of biodiversity governance
 - c. Lindsay C. Stringer – Land use as a cross-cutting issue for multilateral environmental governance and science-based policy making
- III. Brief commentaries (2-3 mins each) bringing different perspectives into the discussions by Kennedy (governing existential risks as a common denominator of the three Rio conventions), Dhanasree (geopolitical perspective on Rio processes and the relevance of “the Global South”), Susan (on how to “IO” environmental multilateralism in spite of it all)
- IV. Roundtable discussion with all and several rounds of questions, then opening for Q&A for the audience (possibly “fishbowl” interventions) – up to 60 mins
- V. Wrap up by Steffen (3 mins)

Speakers

- Joanna Jane Depledge, Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge, UK
- Dhanasree Jayaram, Manipal Institute of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts & ESG Scientific Steering Committee
- Kennedy Liti Mbeva, Centre for the Study of Existential Risk, University of Cambridge, UK & Co-Convenor ESG Climate Governance Taskforce
- Susan Park, International Organization of ESG & CLA of IO domain of the International Panel on Earth System Governance (IPESG)
- Lindsay C. Stringer, YESI, York University, UK, & CLA of IPCC-AR6 and IPBES
- Fariborz Zelli, Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden & ESG Scientific Steering Committee

Moderator: Steffen Bauer, IDOS, ESG Scientific Steering Committee & CLA of IO domain of the International Panel on Earth System Governance (IPESG)

Background:

Bauer, Steffen, Niklas Wagner, Ines Dombrowsky. 2026. *Environmental Multilateralism in 2026: More Robust Than Disruption Narratives Suggest*, in: Anna-Katharina Hornidge and Axel Berger, eds. *Sustainable Futures at Stake? The case for politics of cooperation and perseverance*, IDOS: Bonn (forthcoming)